

story by

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NOVEL

1

ROLL OVER AND DIE

I Will Fight

for an Ordinary Life

with My Love

and Cursed Sword!

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Sara Anvilen

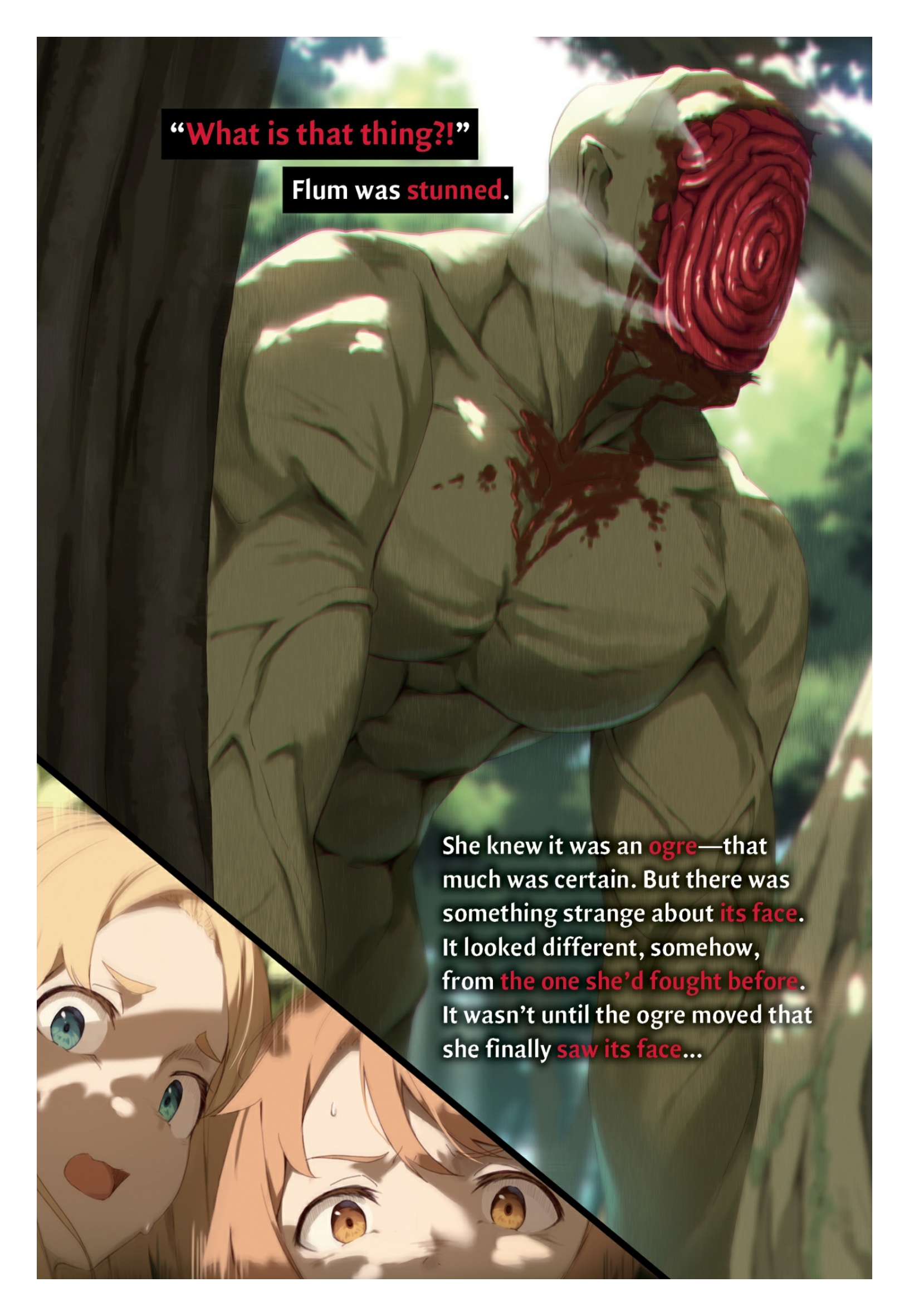
Flum Apricot

Milkitt

"Yum!"

"Wow, Milkitt,
I didn't know you
could cook!"

"I'm glad
you like it."



“What is that thing?!”

Flum was **stunned**.

She knew it was an **ogre**—that much was certain. But there was something strange about **its face**. It looked different, somehow, from **the one she’d fought before**. It wasn’t until the ogre moved that she finally **saw its face**...

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ROLL OVER AND DIE: I WILL FIGHT FOR AN ORDINARY LIFE
WITH MY LOVE AND CURSED SWORD! VOL. 1

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Illustrations by kinta

This edition originally published in Japan in 2018 by

MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

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Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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TRANSLATION: Jason Muell

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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-860-1

Printed in Canada

First Printing: October 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Afterword



The Girl Who Turned Her Back on God

Chapter 1:

The Girl Who Wanted to be Boring

“YOU THINK A LITTLE RUNT like you could defeat the Demon Lord? Not a chance.” The legendary mage glared deep into the trembling girl’s eyes as she dangled in the air, suspended by the collar of her shirt.

She knew it was all true, too. She’d been completely useless in their last demon encounter—worse, she’d needed the party to protect her as well. But she hadn’t had the fortitude to keep a stiff upper lip when she was being called useless. She’d tried to soften the blow by cracking a joke, by pushing back.

And that was how she ended up here.

Flum Apricot forced a smile, though tears burned at the corners of her eyes. The man gave a derisive snort before making his exit. She stood there for some time, gazing down at her feet, before finally dragging her sleeve across her wet eyes.

Her voice trembled as she spoke aloud to no one in particular. “I never really wanted to be here in the first place, you know...”

It had been foretold by Origin, the Divine Creator, that Flum would be one of the brave heroes who felled the Demon Lord. But the other heroes were worlds apart from Flum. The man who had threatened her moments ago was Jean Inteige, the brooding sage who could control the four elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. Then there was Linus Radiant, the eagle-eyed archer who could hit a target from miles away. Maria Affenjenz was a merciful and affectionate holy woman who could heal ailments of the body and mind. Gadhio Lathcutt was armed with a massive blade that he wielded one-handed, carving through even S-Rank monsters with ease. Eterna Rinebow, known in some circles as the timeless witch, wielded such powerful magic that she could send her foes straight to the bottom of the sea. And finally, there was Cyril Sweechka, a young woman who exuded bravery and was said to be the savior born to rid the world of the Demon Lord.

They were each so famous in their own right that even a country bumpkin like Flum had heard of them. It seemed like fate that they would join forces to destroy the Demon Lord once and for all. And it was just as obvious that a small-town girl like Flum didn't belong in such impressive company. The only thing she brought to the table was "Reversal," a bizarre status effect that even she didn't quite understand. Its only apparent effect was that it automatically turned all her stats to zero.

When Cyrill told her that she was foretold to be one of the great heroes, Flum had had no achievements to her name other than leading a quiet life in her village. She did her best to support the party however she could outside of combat, working harder than anyone else on the team. But even when Flum put her life on the line to protect another member of the party, taking injuries in the process, they just said it wasn't worth wasting their magic to heal her.

And yet, she persisted.

When she did manage to be of some help, her party members just brushed her off and told her to stay out of their way.

And yet, she persisted.

When she fixed up some snacks to keep the party fed on their journey, they wouldn't deign her food worthy of eating unless she practically begged them to.

And yet, even so, she persisted.

Looking back, Flum had to admit she might have had something of a victim complex. But be that as it may, it was undeniable that the other heroes treated her like a second-class citizen. She couldn't understand how she'd ended up in this position or why she worked so hard for nothing. She tried to tell herself that she'd done her best, but in the back of her mind, she knew that the day would finally come when she hit her limit.

Flum suddenly felt as if someone was watching her. For a second, she entertained the thought that one of the others had come to try and cheer her up, but it was just Cyrill, silently gazing at her.

Cyrill was short—shorter than Flum, in fact—with loose blonde hair that dangled past her ears. However, there was a power deep within her that would

make even the toughest demons tremble in fear.

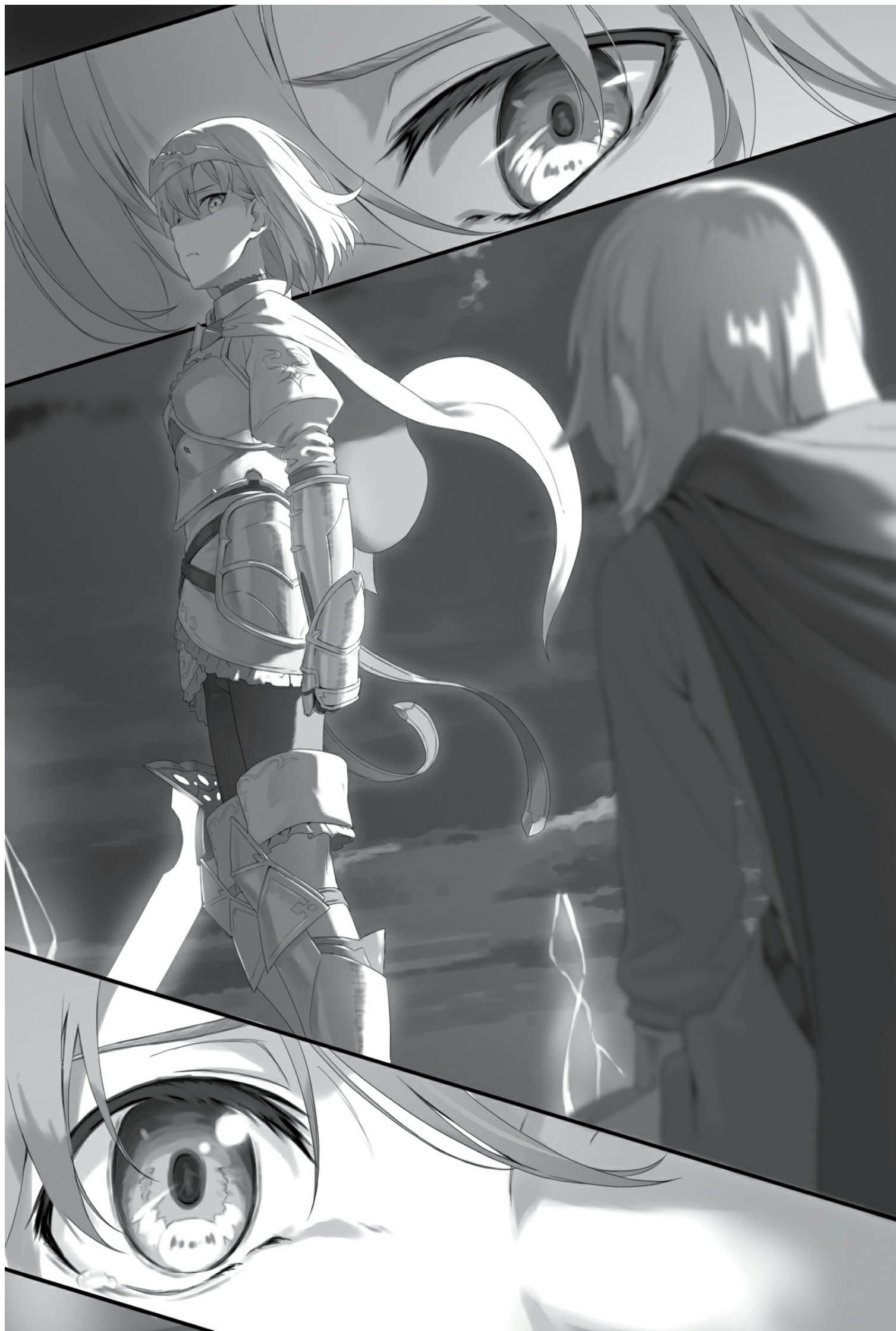
Cyrill Sweechka was the textbook definition of a hero.

Flum couldn't quite gauge what the other girl was thinking, but it was clear that it wasn't anything positive. She decided to try and break the tension. "H-hey, Cyrill..."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Cyrill spun on her heel and began walking away.

Flum felt a knot tighten in her chest and tears well up in her eyes. She bit down hard on her lip to stop herself from crying.

She had been completely abandoned.



When they first began their journey, Flum and Cyrill had been quite close. Not only were they both from small towns, but they were even close in age. However, as Flum's uselessness became more and more apparent, a rift began to form between the two young women. Cyrill stopped trying to cheer her up, as if she didn't want to acknowledge Flum's existence.

Under any normal circumstances, Flum would never have agreed to join a party like this. But it had been foretold by Origin, and the decision wasn't hers to make. The people of her village had been so excited that there was a hero in their midst. How could she have backed out?

She couldn't help but wonder just what her friends and family would think of her now—the young girl they had invested all their hopes and dreams in, now useless and wallowing in self-pity, without a single ally to her name. Just the thought of all of her friends and loved ones giving her the cold shoulder like Cyrill sent Flum sinking further into despair. But giving up wasn't an option. Even if she didn't want to do this, she still had a duty to see her job through.

Dragging a fist across her eyes to wipe away the tears, Flum took off at a jog after the party. No matter how the rest of the party treated her, she knew she had little choice but to rely on them.

She felt alone in the world, without a single person she could truly call a friend.

The continent was split right down the middle, with the humans living down to the south and the demons up to the north. The party was currently on a northward journey into demon territory, slowly but surely closing in on the castle of the Demon Lord.

While they were technically limited to what they could physically carry with them, Cyrill's Return spell allowed them to easily head back to the capital—their home base, of sorts—and pick up anything they were missing. Using the spell again would allow them to teleport back to a "saved" location.

However, designating a "saved" location required the party to use an object known as a teleportation stone, an incredibly rare item found only in ancient

ruins. With a finite supply and no means of making new stones, they could only use them sparingly and at pre-determined locations. What was more, only incredibly skilled mages—Eterna and Jean, basically—could use the powerful magic needed to create a save location using the teleportation stone.

The party would push forward and make some progress, save, return to the capital to replenish their supplies, and then repeat the process all over again. Progress was slow, but they were making clear headway toward the Demon Lord's castle.

Today, the party created a save point and used the Return spell once they'd made it to their objective for the day. They reappeared in the "teleportation room" in the palace basement. It was dark and out of the way of prying eyes, making it the perfect place to pop back into and out of the capital.

Eterna took in a deep, luxurious breath. It'd been several days since they'd been back. "Haaaah, even the air tastes better here."

The air in the dank basement was hardly what could charitably be called fresh, but knowing there weren't enemies lurking around every corner probably helped.

Maria nodded in agreement. "There's just something so...filthy about the air up there."

Linus hurried over toward Maria, gesturing emphatically. "I know we just got back and all, but we're all a little stiff, y'know. I'd be more than happy to give you a massage, Maria, and..."

The smile never left Maria's face as she shut Linus down. She used to flush and rebuke him whenever he cracked one of his off-color jokes but was used to it by now. "Oh, Linus, you know how I detest such lewd propositions."

Linus's shoulders slumped in disappointment, but he wasn't one to give up easily. He quickly pivoted to trying to line up a date. "...I was just gonna say, that was something an old perv would say! Anyway, how about you and me go grab a bite?"

Maria brought her hand to her mouth and gave a refined laugh. "Well, I suppose I could do that."

Linus launched a fist up into the air, unable to contain his excitement.
“Aw’right!”

Without a word to the rest of the party, the two made their way out of the room. Jean shook his head and muttered in disdain to himself, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. They were all allowed a bit of free time until they had to reassemble here in two days.

After Linus and Maria made their exit, the rest of the party slowly dispersed, each member heading off on their own until just Flum and Cyrill remained. Cyrill closed her eyes and concentrated. A moment later, the bejeweled sword she held in her hand disappeared in a flash, leaving only a glowing rune on the palm of her hand. She glared at Flum before turning and leaving the room in a huff.

Flum ran through several scenarios in her mind but couldn’t figure out what she’d done wrong. She and Cyrill both loved sweets, and would usually head out to eat some cake together whenever they were in the capital, but it didn’t seem like that was happening now.

Memories of her hometown and her family came flooding in. “I wish I were home. I wonder what Mom and Dad are up to right now...”

It’d only been a few months since she left her village, but it felt like ages ago. The thought of being back with her warm and loving family brought tears to Flum’s eyes, and she rubbed angrily at them and shook her head, deciding she wasn’t going to let this get the better of her.

She didn’t have time to sit around and feel bad for herself. There were supplies to purchase for their next excursion and only two days to do it. It was the least she could do for the party, considering she wasn’t able to offer much else in the way of support.

The corridor outside the room was chilly and dimly lit. Flum spotted a man nearly double her size and outfitted in black armor, leaning up against the wall with his arms crossed.

“Gadhio? Eterna? What are you doing here?”

She caught sight of Eterna standing in Gadhio’s shadow. The mage stepped out and waved her hand. Her light blue leotard clung tightly to her skin, making

her look like a fish gliding effortlessly through the air. Combined with her steeped headdress and flowing cape, a quick glance was enough to tell you that you were dealing with a rather peculiar mage.

“Going shopping, right? I’ve got a few things to attend to, so I thought I’d join you,” Eterna announced.

“Eterna told me to come along to help carry your bags. I guess that’s fair, though it’s not exactly what I want to be doing with my free time.” Despite his grumbling, Flum could see a kind look on Gadhio’s face.

Apparently, they’d picked up on Flum’s dismal mood and decided to wait for her. Gadhio had been an adventurer for many years, and Eterna, in spite of her youthful appearance, was a fair bit older than Flum.

Flum bowed down low. “Th-thank you!”

Though a relatively simple offer on their part, it relieved some of the weight bearing down on the young girl. She felt a great sense of relief wash over her.

It was only a matter of time until she learned just how wrong she was.

After finishing up her shopping, Flum thanked her companions and parted ways with Eterna and Gadhio. She dropped off her supplies and made her way to their inn, where, stepping into her room, she stopped to look at herself in the mirror and sighed. Even with the added hands to help carry all her bags, Flum was exhausted.

Her stats were all zeroes, after all. Her strength of 0 kept her from carrying any heavy items, and an endurance of 0 left her feeling out of breath after walking just a short way. It wasn’t so bad that she couldn’t live a normal life, but she was definitely less fit than the average person on the street. Even Flum was constantly annoyed by her own weakness.

This was nothing new, of course. It’d been like this ever since she was a kid, and it was all due to her damned affinity.

Everyone was born with an affinity, the most common of which were fire, water, wind, earth, light, and darkness. Depending on your magical ability,

these affinities influenced what kind of magic you could use. A few unique people were born with affinities other than these six. Jean, for example, had the “nature” affinity, granting him the ability to control fire, water, wind, and earth. Cyrill was a “hero,” which gave her access to exclusive spells.

These “rare affinities” were generally far superior to the standard six most of the population possessed. Alas, even these outliers had exceptions, and Flum’s “reversal” affinity was one. Strength, magic, endurance, agility, perception—her stats were zeroes across the board, and stubbornly refused to increase no matter what she did.

“At least the people back in my village were nice to me...”

Back in her hometown, no one made fun of her. The adults treated her like the other children, and the other children readily accepted her as one of them. In retrospect, maybe that had been the exception, not the rule.

Flum mentally cursed the hand fate had dealt her as she tumbled to the bed and hugged a pillow tight. It felt so good to just lay there and rest. She was well and truly exhausted, and was about to call it a night when she was startled by a knock at her door.

“Who is it?” Her brain was still fuzzy.

“It’s Jean. Listen, we need to talk.”

This woke Flum right up. She quickly sprang to her feet and ran over to open the door, stumbling and scraping her knee on the way. She fought back the pain and turned the doorknob with the faintest hint of tears in her eyes. The sage stood on the other side of the door, a solemn look on his face.

“This is certainly a surprise, Jean. What can I do for you?”

“Come with me.”

Despite being offered no information to go on, Flum didn’t feel like she was in any position to turn Jean down. She quickly locked the door behind her and hurried after Jean.

The sage left the inn and moved quickly through the streets, not once bothering to check to see if Flum was actually following him. This wasn’t

because he trusted her but rather that there was no doubt in his mind that she would follow his every command.

Jean turned into a narrow alley lined with drunk, frail-looking men seeking what little warmth they could under threadbare blankets. Flum would never have come down here alone. Becoming more and more worried by the second, she finally spoke up. “S-so, umm, wh-where are we going, Jean?”

Alas, he didn’t even respond. She should have expected as much.

Flum continued to follow in silence as they wove through several alleys before ultimately ending up in a large, open area. They were in a part of the capital that she had never seen before—which wasn’t surprising, considering it was dozens of times larger than any other town she’d been to—but this area was dark and dingy. It almost felt like a different city.

“I-Is this where we were headed?” she asked.

Jean finally turned to address his companion...by reaching out and grabbing a handful of her hair. He dragged Flum toward a man with a hunched back and an insidious smile on his face.

“Ow, you’re hurting me, Jean! Stop it!!”

Her screams fell on deaf ears, which was the whole point of bringing her here. Flum thrashed about in a desperate attempt to break free of Jean’s grip but just wasn’t strong enough.

“Well, well, well, you really did bring me somethin’ purdy, dincha?” The stranger clasped his hands and narrowed his gaze, examining every inch of Flum’s body.

“Just taking out the trash, really.” With that, Jean tossed her at the man’s feet.

“Nnyak!” Flum hit the ground with a painful thud and lay there for a moment. Her feet burned from the scrapes she’d gotten from being dragged along the floor. She looked up at Jean, fear evident on her face, but was met with only a cool, emotionless expression in return.

Finally, he began to speak.

“You have no notable lineage to speak of, and you don’t even have the power to make up for that. All you’ve managed to do is waste our time and hold the rest of us back. Just knowing that I’m forced to breathe the same air as you makes me sick to my stomach. Quite frankly, I think I deserve some credit for having put up with you this long.”

“J-Jean?”

“Scum like you has no right to speak my name!!” In his rage, Jean cast a spell to send a rock shooting straight toward Flum.

“Eek!” The stone flew like an arrow past her face, slicing her left cheek. Flum brought her hand up to her cheek and felt something warm dampen her fingertips. Once she caught sight of the red liquid, she let out a cry of terror.

“Now, now, hold on there. You can’t go damagin’ the wares, y’know.”

“My apologies. I lost my cool for a moment. It’s a minor cut, at least.”

“You’re right, there. It’ll fade with time.” The man handed Jean a steel rod with a large lump at the end. “Anyway, you can decide where it goes.”

Jean took the rod in his hand and summoned up Heat—his fire spell. Ever so slowly, the heat ran up the shaft and caused the chunk of steel at the end to glow red.

“You should be happy, Flum. I’m going to assign you a role that you can actually fulfill.”

“I-Is that...?”

“It’s a branding iron—the mark of a slave, to be exact. Even a lowly creature like yourself must have seen it before, right?”

A slave—a human deemed legal for sale on the open market.

Slaves were generally restricted to those who had been born of slave parents or to certain classes of criminals as a form of punishment. Their overall numbers were on a gradual decline, but when land-owning nobles went to war, the losing soldiers and villagers were often brought back to the capital and enslaved, too.

The last such war had continued until the kingdom managed to lay claim to

much of the continent. Soon after, there had been a wave of the newly enslaved rebelling against their awful living and working conditions, fleeing to survive in the shadows and ultimately leading to an increase in crime. As a countermeasure, the government passed a law to limit the use of excessive violence against slaves, ultimately improving their standard of living...or so people thought. The law also provided for the recapture of so-called “freed slaves,” thereby giving rise to unregulated slave markets run by black marketeers who purchased slaves and sold them for all manners of worldly pleasures.

“Let me spell it out for you, Flum. All slaves in the kingdom must bear the mark of a slave somewhere on their body. And that is what this is. There are probably easier ways to do this, but I decided branding you was the only way I could get my true feelings through to you. What do you think? Pretty nice, huh?”

Everything Jean said was true. A slave’s mark needed to be visible at all times, but it didn’t need to be branded on their skin. That he was about to put this chunk of glowing red metal on Flum’s cheek was nothing short of his own twisted, personal desire.



“St-stop! I don’t want to be a slave!”

“You’ve no say in this.”

“This is wrong, Jean! What gives you the right to make me a slave?!”

The laws of the kingdom forbade forcing an innocent citizen into slavery. This could only mean one thing: that the man standing in front of her was a black marketeer. He had already prepared all the necessary tools to complete her transition into slavery as soon as she was branded.

“...What gives me the right?” Jean’s face contorted with barely controlled rage. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put us all through, you little bi... Grah! If it weren’t for you, we would have been well on our way to the Demon Lord by now! Your very existence has done nothing but hold us back and undermine all of my well-laid plans. You’re nothing more than a commoner, a talentless heap of cannon fodder! Why won’t you just take responsibility for your sins?!”

“Does...does the rest of the party know about this? I may be useless, but I didn’t exactly choose to be here, you know! I was chosen, whether I wanted to be or not!”

“They know. Of course they do.”

“You’re lying! Are you saying that Eterna and Gadhio didn’t even try to stop you??” Flum couldn’t imagine her two recent shopping companions so easily agreeing to this idea.

Jean put an end to that fantasy. “Oh, they hesitated, sure. But they ultimately agreed it was for the best. All in the name of taking down the Demon Lord, you know. Besides, let’s face it, you were a greater burden on them than anyone else.”

This, too, was true. Eterna and Gadhio were always looking out for Flum, which led to her relying on them all the more. Still, she couldn’t—she didn’t want to believe it. Flum pushed on in desperation.

“What about Linus and Maria??”

“They said they didn’t care. They had little to do with you, anyway.”

That was true enough. Flum could hardly recall exchanging even more than a

few words with the two, so it was unlikely they'd stand up for her.

"Then what about...Cyrill?"

Cyrill had been giving her the cold shoulder lately, but they'd been friends not so long ago. It seemed preposterous that she'd so readily agree to selling Flum off as a slave.

The massive smile on Jean's face said otherwise.

"Oh, she readily agreed. In fact, she said she'd be happy to never see your face again."

"You lie..."

"It's all true."

"There's no way..."

"I'm telling you exactly what she told me."

Flum wailed in incomprehension, unwilling to believe what she was hearing. However, Jean pressed on.

"You're being sold into slavery, and we're going to use that money to fund the party. It's not so bad, is it? You're actually contributing something, for once."

"No, nonono! I don't want to be a slave!!"

"Just think—this is the most useful you'll have been since you joined us. Be proud of yourself, kid."

"I...I just wanna go hooome!" Betrayed by her party, the only people left in this world Flum truly felt she could rely on were those back in her home village.

But Jean wasn't done making Flum miserable quite yet. A cruel smile sprang to his lips.

"I wish I could, you know, but that'd be unfair to the poor folk who'd have to take care of a piece of trash like you."

"Mom... Dad..."

"You know, they're probably humming as they go, enjoying their newfound life without a parasite of a daughter like you around. After all, all you really ever

do is drag down other people and take up space. You should be happy that you left them the honor of being the parents of a supposed hero. Hahaha!”

Flum broke out in loud, wailing sobs as she tried to crawl away, but Jean wouldn't let up. Arms shot up from the earth and grabbed her arms and legs, holding her in place. She struggled against her bonds but was just too weak to break free.

Jean cackled menacingly as he brought the brand closer and closer to Flum's tear-soaked cheek. It sizzled for a moment as it pressed into her flesh.

“Aaaaaaauuuuuuuuugh!!!!!!”

Her whole body contorted as she let out an ear-shattering scream. Tears continued to flow down her cheek, turning into steam the moment they touched the hot brand. Flum shook her head violently in a desperate attempt to get away, but another earthy tendril wrapped itself around her neck, holding her head in place.

“Aaaaaaauah!! Aaaaaaaagguuuuaah!!! Gyaaaaaugh!!”

Her voice grew hoarse, but her screaming didn't abate. And as Flum endured the pain, Jean seemed to be enjoying himself all the more.

“Gwahahaha! Now this is poetic justice if I've ever seen it. Just look at you now! Gahahaha!”

“Aaaah...aaa...aaaannng...”

Finally, Flum's voice trailed off as losing consciousness gave her an escape from the pain. Her whole body was covered in sweat, from her shirt down to the comfortable shorts she always wore. No...it wasn't sweat that soiled the shorts. Flum had lost control of her bodily functions as she spasmed and twitched. It was altogether a shameful sight.

Jean peeled the slowly cooling branding iron away from Flum's face. The skin crackled and clung to it as he pulled back, finally separating it from her cheek with a final tug. He tossed the branding iron aside and turned toward the slave trader.

“Well, you seemed t'be enjoying yourself.” The man didn't seem the least bit

bothered by the disturbing scene that had just unfolded in front of him. He was, after all, someone who lived in the darkest corners of civilization.

“She’s put me through a lot, you could say. In fact, I still don’t feel like we’re even.”

“Well, let’s not do any more damage. You might kill her.”

“Kill? I’m not some kind of monster, you know. Anyway, give me my money, and I’ll be on my way.”

The merchant pulled up a hemp bag and gave it a gentle shake, causing the coins inside to clack against each other. He handed it over to Jean. “Here you go.”

Jean hefted the bag to test the weight and gave a satisfied smile before turning around and leaving. Before he’d even left the small square, the merchant was tending to Flum with the supplies he’d readied in advance. The application of a magical pigment would ensure that the brand would never disappear.

From that moment on, Flum had lost all rights and privileges to live life as a normal person.

Chapter 2:

Flum's Blessing in Disguise

THE SLAVE TRADER lifted Flum by her reddish-brown hair and threw one kick after another at her stomach. "You worthless wretch! Do you know how much money you lost me?! Why...you...little...!!"

Flum heaved and gasped as the toe of the man's shoe landed. A trail of drool ran out the side of her mouth and down her chin. A droplet fell onto the man's shoe, which only spurred a new outburst of violence.

"What're you doin' actin' like the victim in all this?? It's all your fault that you're so worthless that no one'll buy ya!"

The dull thud of boot meeting flesh continued to echo throughout the room.

When the famed hero Jean Inteige had first approached him to say he had a girl to sell, the merchant had almost gotten down on his knees to thank the heavens right then and there. Forcing an innocent girl into slavery was obviously against the law, and to make matters worse, she was one of the heroes chosen to defeat the Demon King! But this also implied the unfortunate soul had some pretty impressive stats—stats that would sell for a very nice markup on the open market. Even Jean himself had said "the reward is well worth the risk, I assure you."

And so, the merchant did his due diligence and kept to his part of the deal. He avoided asking questions; not because he was being polite, *per se*, but because Jean gave him the impression that he wasn't supposed to. In retrospect, that had been a clear sign that something was off. Jean had been tight-lipped with information and hadn't even tried to haggle for more money.

How could he have been so stupid?

The first time the merchant started to worry was when he saw how Jean dragged Flum over and how he disparaged her. "Useless," he had said. Right in front of the man who was hoping to buy this girl at an exorbitant price. But he was dealing with a legendary hero—a sage, even!—and so the merchant had

accepted his terms sight unseen.

It was only after completing the transaction and making his exit that the man finally decided to check Flum's stats. Fortunately, this was easily accomplished with the Scan spell, simple magic anyone could use, regardless of their affinity.

Flum Apricot

Affinity: Reversal

Strength: 0

Magic: 0

Endurance: 0

Agility: 0

Perception: 0

When it became apparent that Flum's stats were all zeroes, the blood drained from the merchant's face. And by that point, of course, Jean was already long gone.

Under normal circumstances, he would always use Scan prior to making a purchase. Now, he realized Jean would probably have called off the deal right there if he'd tried to use Scan at any point during the transaction.

It came down to this: he'd been played. Jean had seen right through him.

About a week had passed since the merchant had so readily parted with a large sum of money to have this girl foisted upon him. No matter how sour he was about the whole affair, he couldn't exactly return her, and considering he'd bought her on the black market, a girl with stats that were all zeroes was pretty much unsellable.

But that was all about to change.

The merchant grabbed Flum by the collar of her threadbare shirt and dragged her down the stone corridor, the rough flooring scraping against her skin as they went.

"Ow...owww..."

She no longer put up much objection to this degree of pain. Nor did she have the mental energy to try and imagine where she was being taken now. It wasn't going to be nice, that much she knew. She might be sold to someone else, or maybe even killed—either way, her future was grim. The moment she was

branded a slave, Flum knew she would never be going home again.

She'd cried in the beginning, but at this point, Flum had given up. She didn't even struggle as the merchant dragged her down a flight of stairs, only letting out small yelps of pain when her legs or thighs slammed into the step below. Once in the basement, the merchant unlocked a cage and threw her inside before quickly locking the door behind her.

Flum hit the ground with a loud thud and collapsed to the cold floor.
"Nnnng..."

She propped herself up and looked around the cage. She spotted four other slaves in here with her, their dull eyes confirming that they had all accepted their impending demise. It seemed no one was bothering to feed these people, since they all looked sickly and frail.

The cage was also filthy, though that was to be expected. It smelled absolutely foul, causing Flum's nose to instinctively scrunch up. In one corner was a woman surrounded by her own feces and urine. An eerie smile graced her face. Her heart was still beating, but inside, she was already dead.

Suddenly, she heard the merchant speak up from where he sat in a chair just outside the cell.

"Well, it's getting pretty full in here. I guess it's about time."

It was clear something was about to start, but none of the walking dead in the cell seemed to show any interest in what that something was. The man stood from his chair and walked away to start his preparations. For the moment, the only sound in the basement was the slaves' breathing.

Flum crawled to the back of the room and rested her back against the wall. As she slowly began to control her breathing and took in her surroundings, her gaze came to rest on an odd-looking figure, their face covered in bandages.

She figured she'd make some small talk to pass the time. "How...how long have you been in here?"

The figure slowly turned to face Flum. When they finally spoke, it was to say, "I was brought here three days ago."

Flum hadn't realized she was a girl until she heard her speak. She was so thin that the outlines of her bones were visible just underneath her skin, and the bandage wrapped around her face obscured her features. Her light grey hair brushed against her shoulders; Flum figured it might even be silver if given a good wash. The length of her hair alone might have given away her gender, but it was ragged, as if it had been cut forcefully with a rusty blade.

The girl's clothing was dingy, her skin smeared with grime, and she carried with her a slightly pungent odor. And yet, there was something about the way she looked into Flum's eyes that left her breathless. Her eyes were absolutely beautiful. Flum couldn't make herself look away.

In those eyes, she saw a beautiful femininity and a look of pure innocence. Had fate treated her differently, Flum was certain that this girl would be leading a truly happy life. She could tell just by looking into her beautiful eyes, a stark contrast to the disgusting dungeon they found themselves in.

"Umm... So...uhh... I suppose everyone here's going to be killed?"

"I don't know, but the master said that he'd be disposing of us all."

"The master?"

"The man from earlier. No one will buy me, so that makes him my master."

"Oh... I see..."

Flum could tell that she and this other woman had lived completely different lives. It sounded like she had been a slave from a very young age and was accustomed to this.

Upon closer inspection, Flum noticed that some of the skin under the girl's bandages was red and inflamed. She shuddered to think about just what punishment the other woman had received at the hands of their so-called master.

Flum didn't feel like continuing her conversation with the bandaged figure, though she was surprised at just how young the other girl seemed to be. As she let the silence envelop them, she noticed the girl stare at her for a while longer before finally turning her gaze back to the ground.

The two sat there, hugging their legs to their chests for warmth, staring vacantly at the grey floor. Flum watched some bugs she'd never seen before squirm around the cell on their countless legs. Under other circumstances, she'd have been disgusted by the sight and tried to get as far away as she could, but now she stared, fixated.

After an indeterminate amount of time, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Looking up, she spied the merchant standing on the other side of the bars. He set a small chair down in front of the cell and sat, crossing one leg over another.

"Well, well, well. You probably already know this, but you're all sittin' on the junk heap right now. You have no value on the market, and I can't just be pourin' money into the care of worthless pieces of meat, so I'm going t'have to do away with you. However..."

The merchant smirked.

"I blew money on acquiring you in the first place and then blew even more just to keep you alive. At the very least, I deserve t'get some fun out of your deaths, no?"

No one responded. Though he didn't seem to have expected them to, the merchant still clicked his tongue in annoyance at the silence. He then stood up and walked away, disappearing into the darkness.

Though Flum couldn't see it from where she sat, there was apparently a handle of some sort attached to the wall across from them. She could hear the metal scraping as the man cranked it with both hands. Stone scraped against stone as the ceiling groaned above them, pebbles and dust showering the cell's occupants.

Flum slowly turned her eyes toward the source of the sound when three human-shaped objects dropped through the newly opened hole in the ceiling and hit the ground with a thud.

They weren't human-shaped, actually. They had been humans, once. When they were alive.

Blood and other fluids oozed from the contorted corpses, filling the room

with an awful rotting stench. The insects were initially startled by the loud noise but now hungrily swarmed toward the new arrivals.

The merchant appeared once again in front of the cell, a proud smile on his face. “Didja figure it out yet? These are ghouls. When you leave a corpse exposed to magic long enough, they start movin’ around on their own and turn into F-Rank monsters.”

As he spoke, the ghouls made gurgling and slurping noises. They shuddered to life, their heads twisting around in search of prey. The moans that escaped from their half-rotten throats were otherworldly.

Flum had encountered ghouls before on her journey. As the man said, these were low-level F-Rank monsters. They were slow, and fragile because of their rotting flesh.

“Tell you what—if you can put the hurt on these ghouls, then I’ll put you back up for sale and let you live a little while longer. But be careful. These guys ain’t pushovers.”

Many newbie adventurers made the mistake of letting their guard down in the face of the F-Rank ghouls, only to find themselves killed by a powerful bite to their neck. A regular person with no fighting experience stood no chance against these monsters, especially equipped with nothing but their bare hands.

“Welp, looks like they’re already off to a good start!”

The ghouls rushed toward the feces-covered woman sitting in the corner, driven by pure hunger and a desire to replace their rotten flesh with that of the living. They opened their mouths wide, baring their yellowed teeth and spattering the ground with drool. The woman didn’t even scream. She simply sat there and stared back blankly at the monsters looming in to tear her flesh apart.

One caught her thigh, another her shoulder, and the third took a bite out of her cheek. The ghouls chewed sloppily as they tore into the woman’s flesh. After a short time, her body began to convulse and pink liquid bubbled up at the corners of her mouth. With one final heave, her head dropped to the side, and her body ceased all movement.

And yet, there was something peaceful about her face. Like she'd finally been released from all the pain and suffering she endured living in this world.

The ghouls were far from satisfied, though.

Upon actually witnessing the woman being murdered in front of them, Flum and the others in the cell realized that they weren't willing to just up and die. At least not yet. The bandaged girl Flum had spoken to earlier fidgeted weakly, as if struggling with the idea of her imminent death.

A broad smile graced the merchant's face. He seemed to be enjoying the fear spreading through the surviving occupants of the cell.

"You better do something soon, or you're next! But you can't possibly defeat a ghoul with just your bare hands, right? Oh, hey! Look over at that wall! Isn't that a broadsword over there? It's too heavy for any of you, but I mean, who knows. Maybe it's an Epic class weapon and has some kinda magic on it!"

Of course, everyone knew this was a trap. But what choice did they have if they wanted to live? The only man in the cell ran immediately to the sword and grabbed the hilt. Alas, the massive steel weapon was just too heavy for his frail arms to heft. Its tip hit the stone floor with a shower of sparks and a loud clang.

The sound drew the attention of the ghouls, who began to move toward him. The man couldn't even lift the sword up off the ground, much less fight them off.

"Hah...hah...nnngraaw!! I'm not gonna die here! I'm going to get out of here and make everything r-right..." His voice trailed off as he continued to struggle, eliciting a laugh from the merchant.

"Glad to see you've got that kinda gumption! Good on ya. Just for that, I'm going to make sure you don't suffer quite so much."

The man gripping the sword suddenly began to scream.

"You...you bastard! My body, it's... Gaaaugh!!"

Looking closer, Flum could see that the skin on the back of his hands was peeling off, exposing the flesh and bone underneath. And it wasn't just his hands. The flesh across his body was beginning to peel away under his clothes.

Next came the muscle underneath, which began to melt into a thick, goopy liquid as the man's body surrendered its shape.

"Gyahahaha!! Oh, what a shame. You sure went at it, but unfortunately that sword there is cursed. Anyone who touches it will die a gruesome death. That black blade kinda gives it away, dunnit? I got it just like I got little ol' Flum here. Someone told me it was an Epic class weapon and tricked me into buying it. When will I learn? Well, to be fair, it actually *is* an Epic weapon. Bwahahaha!"

The merchant clapped his hands together and cackled in sadistic delight.

"On the other hand, it was pretty fun to watch that junk sword clean up the other junk I'd accumulated. I guess it wasn't a total waste!"

As he spoke, the ghouls turned to their next target: the third girl in the cage apart from Flum and the bandaged girl. The girl waved her arms frantically, as if trying to direct them away.

"Why me?? Please, go that way. Please, please, stay away from me!"

This only made the merchant laugh all the harder. The girl lunged to the bars and clung desperately to them as she pushed her face into the gap.

"Please save me, I beg of you! I'll do whatever I have to do to make sure someone will buy me, I promise!"

The merchant responded to the desperate girl with a warm smile. He stood from his seat and knelt down in front of her, bringing his head down to eye level. A glimmer of hope began to well up in the girl's chest as she saw the look on his face. Maybe, just maybe, there was still a shred of humanity left in this man who made his living buying and selling other humans.

"A-are you going to save me?"

"You're filthy."

The look of warmth never left the merchant's face as he pulled a knife and stabbed it right through the soft part at the base of her throat.

"Gnng...nnnhhg..."

The blade went straight through the base of her tongue, through her nose, and into her brain.

“Whew, that stinks! Hard to believe another human could be that rank. Though, to be fair, it’s an insult to me to put us in the same category. Gahaha!”

The girl’s body slowly slumped down to the floor, her face still pressed tightly against the bars, balanced on the knife’s hilt. The merchant returned to his seat and looked down at the dead girl before belting out another laugh.

The world was vast.

A vast domain, filled with revolting creatures, that surrounded Flum’s little village. If only she’d stayed where she was. She’d never even wanted to leave. Chosen by the Divine Creator—no, it was more like she’d been *cursed*.

She’d led a nice, simple life back in her village. She’d help her parents in the fields all morning, and then they’d head back in to enjoy a warm lunch together. In the afternoon, her friends would invite her out to play. They’d while away the hours visiting shops around the village, picking flowers, and going on adventures in the nearby woods, all the while talking about nothing in particular as the sun slowly set. The weak Flum had to take regular breaks just to keep up with the rest of the kids, but no one mocked her for it.

If she were home now, it’d be just about time for dinner. Her family would be laughing and chatting around the table before getting ready for bed, knowing another day much like this one awaited them at sunrise.

How she missed those days.

She’d never wanted for anything, and she’d never complained. Everyone had praised her for being such a good kid, even if she wasn’t exactly the best daughter her parents could have hoped for. All of her stats were stuck at zero, after all. But was that really so bad? Every child had their own way of making their parents’ lives difficult. Her parents had always laughed off any suggestions that she might be a bother.

This wasn’t right.

She couldn’t just let her life end like this, screaming in misery while a ghoulish creature ate her alive.

“No! No, no! I don’t want to die like this!! I didn’t do anything to deserve this!!”

A flurry of emotions ran through Flum's mind—anger, fear, hatred, terror—as she faced down the stumbling bodies of rotting flesh. They groaned out as they finally took notice of her and dragged themselves ever closer.

“Didn’t do anything? Ha! I got cheated out of a big, fat sum of money ’cause of you, kid! Now, just die for your sins!”

“None of that’s my fault! I didn’t do any of that to you!”

She had been sold, enslaved, and now she was about to be killed. And she was supposed to be held accountable for it, too? This wasn’t how the world was supposed to work. So why was it that the merchant was the one getting his way? How did his word become law? Did might really make right, after all?

If that was true, Flum was doomed to die. She was going to be torn apart in the most grotesque of ways, reduced to a pile of meat and bones in a cold, dark corner of this miserable place.

No one would mourn her; no tears would be shed. Her parents would never know what had happened to her. Her body would be dumped somewhere and burnt with the other trash, and no one would remember that a girl named Flum had once existed.

And she hated that.

“Well, if you hate the idea of dying so much, why don’t you grab a weapon and fight? Gyahaha!”

A weapon...

Flum’s eyes scanned the room and settled on the broadsword lying on the ground. Next to it lay the white bones and goopy mess that had once been her cellmate. Give up and get eaten, or fight back and melt away. Either way, she was going to die.

But at least she’d die with some honor if she went down fighting. Even if the end result was the same, she’d rather die that way than let this man get his jollies from her surrender.

Flum forced herself up to her feet with a cry. Her body was weakened, she was hungry, and the fact that she’d spent the last week being the merchant’s

punching bag didn't help matters either. Even walking bow-legged, she still trembled with each and every step. She could hear the man cackling from beyond the bars, but she clenched her jaw and forced herself forward one step at a time.

At this rate, the ghouls would probably make it to her before she even had a chance to lay a hand on the sword.

“Nng...aaaah...oooww...!”

However, she continued to tell herself that she wasn't going to let it end like this.

“...And yet, I persisted. I persisted...and persisted...and still, I persisted!”

Somehow, these words helped her find the strength she needed to overcome her fears and put the next foot forward, her strides growing longer and longer with every step. Alas, no matter how strong her determination, the awful reality of her situation could not be escaped. Before she knew it, one of the ghouls grabbed her shoulder with its rotting hand.

“Ah!”

Flum's body twisted about helplessly as the powerful ghoul yanked her closer and brought its head near her left shoulder, its mouth gaping open and dripping with tendrils of saliva. A moment later, diseased brown teeth bit through her thin clothes and dug deep into her flesh.

“Nnngaaah!”

Blood mixed with the thick saliva and began to gush from her skin where the ghoul had taken a bite. The ghoul twisted its head back and forth, tearing away at the flesh.

“Gaaaaaaugh!!”

Flum's face contorted in pain as a piece of her shoulder was ripped free. She dropped to the stone floor.

Up ahead, she spied the sword. Her left arm was a lost cause, but she continued on, crawling as fast as her legs and right arm could propel her.

The merchant cheered her on from the sidelines. “You got this, just a little

more!”

The bandaged girl followed Flum’s movements, her eyes cold and emotionless.

Flum continued to grunt, her breath ragged, as she fought her way through the pain and inched closer and closer to the sword. She was still moving much slower than before, though, and the ghoul was on her again. This time, it was the soft flesh of her calf that readily gave way to its gnashing teeth.

Another ghoul descended upon her and took a bite from her left thigh. The third and final ghoul made its presence known when it started gnawing on her heel.

Flum’s legs were now useless. All she had was her right arm.

A chill flooded her body, clammy with cold sweat from the massive loss of blood. Her lungs struggled valiantly with each breath to supply her with oxygen. Just remaining conscious was a battle in its own right. Flum worried she might black out at any moment from the pain.

Her persistence would be her savior. Her finger—the very tip of her middle finger—brushed against the sword’s hilt. She stretched out her hand further and managed to get a firm grip on it.

“I...I did it.”

And now she could melt away and die.

She’d lost all feelings in her legs as the ghouls continued to feast on her flesh. Everything below her waist was now just a mixture of flesh, bones, and blood. But what did it matter? She was going to die anyway. At least she was doing it on her own terms. Whether that was important or not, she couldn’t say, but it left her with a strange sense of satisfaction.

Flum closed her eyes and felt the pain slowly dissipate. A sense of warmth enveloped her and her body felt light.

So this was what it felt like to die.

The merchant’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Wha...?!”

Flum didn’t care what he had to say. She was dying, after all.

“What’s goin’ on??”

Or at least, she thought she was.

“What’s this?? Wh-why are your wounds healing??”

Hearing the confusion in the man’s voice, Flum finally decided to open her eyes one last time.

And then she saw it...

“Huh?”

The ghouls were backing away from Flum, keeping an uneasy distance. What was more, the flesh that had been torn off from her legs just moments ago was back where it should be, without even a scratch to be seen. Even her shoulder was restored.

Flum brought her hand up to her face and opened and closed it a few times. She pinched her cheek. It hurt.

So it wasn’t just her imagination or some cruel dream. That meant that her body...

Flum stood and hefted the sword with one hand. It wasn’t light, by any means, but it wasn’t particularly heavy, either.

This frail little girl was somehow lifting a massive blade nearly as tall as her with one hand.

It didn’t make sense to her, but Flum understood this much. She hadn’t given up. Even in her darkest hour, she’d crawled toward her objective and achieved what she set her heart on.

“So...I don’t have to die?”



Flum looked over her now-healed body and felt newfound determination well up within her.

“Yeah...yeah! I didn’t do anything wrong! There’s no reason I should have to die in a miserable place like this.”

The ghouls began slowly and uneasily to approach her once again. Despite their ghastly appearance, they no longer inspired the same fear that they had just moments ago. Flum closed her eyes and let out a breath to clear her mind. She tightened her grip on the hilt, held the blade at the ready, and launched toward the monsters.

She had nothing to fear, after all. The blade was much longer than the ghouls’ reach.

Copying what she’d seen her party members do in the past, she closed in until she was just within striking distance, brought down her blade, and...

“Hyaaaaa!!”

Fwok!

The three ghouls were all severed at the waist, the top halves of their bodies lopped clean off. Flum, with her strength stat of zero, was befuddled to see them so easily cleaved in two with just a single strike. Sure, their flesh was rotten, but this was impressive. There must be something special about this blade.

Not that she really cared about the specifics right now. She was just glad it worked. What she *did* care about was escaping with her life.

Flum approached the door to the cage and gave the sword another powerful swing.

Clang!

The heavy blade easily parted the lock and sent the door flying open with a screech. Stepping out of the cell, she found herself face to face with the cowering merchant.

“W-wait a minute here! Listen, I, uh, you can go free, okay? So please, please spare me!”

This was the same man who'd been cackling just moments ago as he watched the slaves die in front of him. How quickly people changed. Still, Flum debated whether she should kill him. She had never raised a hand in violence before and didn't want to turn into a murderer now. And if the merchant was some sort of influential figure in the capital, then that could make her a hunted criminal.

However...

"Haa... Augh?!"

She ran the sword straight through his right shoulder, cleanly severing his right arm from his body and sending it dropping limply to the floor. The merchant took a moment to react due to the suddenness of it all.

"Aaaaaaguh!!! My...my arm!!"

"Shut up, old man."

Next, she removed his left arm with the blood-drenched blade. His screams reverberated throughout the basement.

"Gryaaaaaugh!!"

Flum was surprised by how calm she felt as she inflicted such pain upon another human being for the first time. It was like carving meat. In her mind, the man was no longer human.

The merchant continued to scream as Flum speared his left leg, remembering all the times he had kicked her with it. It had hurt. A lot. Her torso was covered in bruises, and her body ached all over. The only thing she'd been given to eat in days was scraps of moldy bread that she was barely able to choke down.

"Aaaugh! P-please, just s-s-stop!"

His right leg was next. Another slice of the blade revealed white fat amidst the blood-soaked muscle. She could even see his thighbone peeking through. She felt nothing but hatred for this appendage that he'd so swiftly turned into a weapon, but once separated from his body, it was nothing more than a piece of meat.

"Please, please, forgive..." His voice was barely more than a whisper, probably from the loss of blood. Flum didn't want him to bleed out before she was done.

“I...I beg of you...”

Swish!

Fwop!

She swung the sword parallel to the ground and right through the side of his head, lopping the top half of the man’s head clean off. Blood erupted from his severed skull like a fountain, splattering Flum’s face, as he slowly slumped to the floor. A mixture of blood and brains spread across the ground, and an awful stench now wafted off of the man who once had the gall to call her dirty.

Flum remained unperturbed by the grotesque scene in front of her. She felt no guilt. She felt, in fact, much the same as when she slayed the ghouls. Come to think of it, all she’d done was kill another monster that happened to look like a human. A monster even more rotten on the inside than the ghouls had been.

She felt a growing sense of assurance. She was right. She wasn’t crazy. Her outlook on the world had just changed a bit, thanks to the ordeal she’d endured this past week.

Slowly, she realized that she didn’t have a sheath for her sword. She might be able to wield it one-handed, but she couldn’t just walk around town with it out like this.

“What to do...?”

As she pondered, the sword suddenly exploded in a shower of light and vanished into the palm of her hand, leaving behind a red rune in its place.

“That’s right—he said it was an Epic class weapon, just like the ones Cyril used. She could make them appear and disappear at will...”

There were five classes of equipment: Common, Uncommon, Rare, Legendary, and Epic. Much like a person’s stats, the class of a piece of equipment could be ascertained by using Scan. The wielder of an Epic piece of equipment could summon it from—and send it away to—a parallel dimension of sorts.

Due to their high stats and how easy they were to carry around, Epic equipment was ridiculously expensive—not something your run-of-the-mill

slave trader would have access to. Like he said, he'd probably gotten tricked into buying it for what he thought was a steal thanks to it being cursed.

Regardless, Flum was just glad to not have to carry it around town with her. With that out of the way, she turned her attention back to the cage and locked eyes with the lone living occupant, the bandaged girl.

She stepped into the cage and offered a hand to the young girl.

"Huh?" The other girl only tilted her head in confusion. The suddenness of her movement caused her bandages to rustle.

"Huh, nothin'. We're getting out of here."

"But why?"

"The merchant's dead now. There's no reason for us to be here anymore."

The young girl stared blankly back at Flum. Her eyes were absolutely beautiful and yet so completely devoid of any emotion. It was impossible to even guess what was going through her mind.

"Listen, it's gonna be really bad for me if someone finds out that I killed the merchant, okay? Now c'mon and hurry up!"

Flum was now getting impatient. She grabbed the girl's hand, pulled her to her feet, and then started to lead her outside.

"Umm..."

"What?"

"Are you my master now?"

This stopped Flum in her tracks.

"That wasn't exactly what I was thinking..."

"But you took me out of that place, didn't you? Aren't you going to use me?"

"Use...?"

"If that's not what you intend, then why would you take me with you? I don't know what I'm supposed to do if I'm with someone who isn't my master."

This girl knew nothing but life as a slave. To the only relationship she could

conceive of between two people was that of a slave and her master. To be completely honest, Flum hadn't put a lot of thought into bringing her along. If anything, she just felt bad leaving her all on her own. But if the girl insisted on having a master...

"Fine. From here on out, I'm your master. Now will you come with me?"

The girl nodded firmly. Was that all it took?

"First things first, introductions. I'm Flum Apricot, 16 years old. You?"

"My name is Milkit, and I'm 14 years old. I'm pleased to meet you, Master." The girl bowed her head low. This caught Flum a bit off guard.

"Right, uh... Nice to meet you, Milkit." She grabbed the younger girl's hand and gave a gentle tug.



They made their way up the stairs and out of the damp basement, searching for an exit. Simply not being around the oppressive smell of death did wonders for Flum's mood. They soon found the front entrance to the building, but were both still dressed in rags, so Flum took two cloaks hanging next to the door. After wrapping themselves up, they finally stepped outside.

A short walk later, Flum found herself in the alley where Jean had sold her. Unpleasant memories came flooding back, and she stopped for a moment. However, Milkit's cool gaze spurred her to continue on.

She marched toward the main thoroughfare, trying to push the memory of coming here with Jean out of her mind.

There was a massive increase in foot traffic once they made it to the main road, and suddenly, Flum began to feel better. The fresh air made her feel at peace—made her feel like she was a human again.

Intermission 1:

The Tiny Damaged Cog

IT'D BEEN TWO DAYS since he sold Flum to the slave trader, and she obviously wouldn't be showing up at the designated meeting in the castle basement. Once the other heroes had assembled, Jean spoke up.

"Flum decided to go home. She won't be joining our party anymore."

Cyrill was the first to respond. Her eyes went wide, and she fixed Jean with a suspicious look. "What?"

The other members of the party seemed mostly disinterested in this new development. Eterna narrowed her brow, Gadhio harrumphed, Maria cast her gaze downward and bit her lip, and Linus mumbled to himself that this was probably for the best.

Cyrill's voice wavered. "What do you know about this, Jean?"

Jean scowled like he'd just bitten down on a bug. He'd expected her to be grateful that Flum was no longer a member of their party. Perhaps that had been too optimistic. Somehow, Flum managed to cause him problems even after she was gone.

"I helped make up her mind, of course. It just didn't make sense for her to accompany us any longer, and she knew it. She decided to go home."

"She left...on her own?"

"That's right. We can all just forget about her now. It's not like she was any use to begin with. You agreed with me on that, didn't you, Cyrill?"

"Y-yeah."

Jean fancied himself as the perfect match for Cyrill. There was quite an age gap between the two, with Jean being 28 years old compared to her 16, but he considered skill a far more important criteria than age. If he were to see his bloodline continue on into the future, he'd want it to be with someone just as magnificent as himself.

And then he met her—Cyrill Sweechka, the picture of perfection. There was just one problem: the one that she grew closest to was not him but rather the pointless, talentless, worthless piece of garbage known as Flum. They were both girls around the same age and from similar backgrounds, so it was hardly surprising they'd found common ground. Still, their friendship offended Jean's already overbearing sense of pride. He'd never felt such rage in his life. He and Cyrill—two highly talented people—were practically meant to be together, and yet here Cyrill was, choosing Flum over him.

He was left with little choice but to lead his wayward Cyrill back onto the proper path. This was something he was quite good at. After all, it was his sheer innate talent and tenacity that had allowed him to achieve the position of sage. If he played his cards right, it would be relatively simple to get Cyrill to forget Flum and get the troublesome girl out of his hair in one fell swoop.

"In that case, there's no sense in worrying, no?" Jean walked over and wrapped his arms around Cyrill.

"Right." She gave a weak nod.

The rest of the party members, meanwhile, didn't seem to think too much of Flum's sudden disappearance. Once the Return spell was cast, the room filled with light, and the six heroes were teleported back to their last save point.

Jean felt like a young boy again, filled with restless energy the night before a camping trip, as his mind wandered over all the magnificent possibilities that awaited him.

"Hey Cyrill, Jean...wait up, will ya!" Linus's irritation was clear in his voice as he shouted after his comrades. They were already in demon territory, after all, and this wasn't the first time he had to call after them.

"Oh, sorry, Linus." Cyrill stopped and looked back at Linus apologetically.

Jean stepped over and patted her back gently, urging her on. "There's nothing to apologize for, Cyrill. Now that Flum's gone, we don't need to go so slow. Right, Linus?"

"Huh? I feel like I'm repeating myself here, Jean. We weren't going slow just

to help Flum keep up. We're in the badlands right now, we need to move carefully!"

"There's nothing out here that can stand against us!"

"But what if we were to be attacked by one of the Demon Chiefs, huh? Don't you think it prudent to move with a little bit of caution?"

The mere mention of the Demon Chiefs left Jean at a loss for words. Thus far, the heroes had only encountered two of these monsters that served directly under the Demon Lord: the hematophage, Neigass and the will-o'-the-wisp, Tsyon. They'd failed to defeat either. The creatures' power was so impressive that even Jean's magic was of little use against them. It had been the closest they'd come to being wiped out.

"You get it, don't you? We need to slow down."

"Hmph."

Jean had little choice but to acquiesce. He had been hoping to speed up their journey with Flum out of the way, but apparently, he was the only one who saw it that way.

Cyrill, on the other hand, looked anxiously at her surroundings with a troubled look on her face. She was thinking about Flum—about all the awful things she'd said and how she'd hurt the other girl. And now their paths had parted. Though she no longer had any right to call herself a friend, she still considered Flum an ally and comrade. Cyrill, who had grown up in a peaceful village far from the front lines, could never have withstood the pressures of being a chosen hero without Flum's cheerful companionship.

And yet...

"I really was ungrateful."

Alas, no matter how much she regretted it, it wouldn't bring Flum back. All that she could do was take down the Demon Lord and save the world.

The rest of the party took notice of Cyrill's change in demeanor. Now that Jean had been fully admonished, Linus made his way back to Maria and let out a heavy sigh.

“Something’s not right.”

“What’s wrong, Linus? It’s not like you to be so down on yourself.”

“I dunno, just...the whole vibe, I guess? Honestly, I was pretty rough on Flum, and now that she’s gone, the group just feels kinda lifeless.” The mood was certainly a lot more lighthearted when she was around. Sure, Jean was always in a bad temper, but he was like that irrespective of whether or not Flum was around.

“I see what you mean,” Maria mused. “Cyrill’s been down in the dumps, Jean’s rushing ahead like a madman, Eterna’s trying to act like everything’s fine despite clearly being in a bad mood, and Gadhio hasn’t spoken a single word.”

“And how about you, Maria?”

“Me? Well...” Maria hesitated for a moment as Linus gazed at her intently.

“You sense it, too?”

“I...I think so.”

“Strange, isn’t it? You and I didn’t even really interact with Flum all that much.”

“Cyrill and I talk a lot, though. Earlier in our travels, Flum was all she spoke about.”

“I get it. When Cyrill’s down, it has a huge effect on the party’s morale.”

Despite her youth, Cyrill was without a doubt the leading force of the party. Without her, taking on the Demon Chiefs would be next to impossible, to say nothing of the Demon Lord.

“This may be a bit out of line to say in front of a follower of Origin such as yourself, but...”

Maria smiled at Linus’s attempt to appear restrained and sophisticated.

“Please just speak your mind, Linus. I’m well aware of your lack of subtlety.”

“I’m not sure if that’s reassuring, but...oh well. Anyway, when I heard that all of Flum’s stats were zero, I was wondering if perhaps the Divine Creator had made a mistake.”

The refined smile that graced Maria's beautiful face made Linus's heart race. From her blonde hair to her pale skin, and even the aristocratic way she spoke and carried herself, Maria was the woman of his dreams.

"Origin makes no mistakes," Maria said.

"Y-yeah, of course. She still had an important role in the team. I guess it wouldn't be right to try to make her stay, though."

It was too late to ask her to come back, anyway. Not only would it probably put Jean in an even worse mood, but Linus had reservations about putting the poor girl back into danger after she'd chosen to leave. They'd just have to make do without her.

Maria spoke softly but firmly. "That's right, Linus. We have been charged with the honorable duty of ridding the world of these demons, and we must see our task through to the end, no matter the cost."

Linus wasn't quite convinced. Did she really feel, deep in her heart of hearts, that it was their solemn duty to save the world? Or did something dark and amorphous lurk within, clouding that pure heart of hers?

He'd have his answer once the battle had run its course and the dust had cleared. For now, Linus just knew that he was traveling down a path he'd never been on before.

Normally, Flum was in charge of meal prep. Now that she was gone, Gadhio had taken over. Not only was he an S-Rank adventurer, but he had the most experience with living off the land.

"Just remember, I make no promises about how it tastes." Gadhio spoke modestly as he served up helpings of the meat from a monster they'd slayed earlier in the day. It wasn't much to look at compared to what Flum had made, but it tasted good.

While the rest of the party enjoyed their meal, Jean scowled. Monster meat tended to have a rather unique, earthy smell to it. This could be covered up by the use of herbs and spices, but even that only did so much for those unfortunate enough to be especially sensitive to the smell.

“Isn’t there anything you can do about the smell, Gadhio? It used to be a lot more...palatable.”

“Hey, this is the best I can do.”

“So you’re saying that Flum could do it, but that’s too much for an S-Rank adventurer like yourself?”

Gadhio’s expression remained the same despite Jean’s needling, though it did seem to have the effect of annoying Eterna. Gadhio replied, “That’s because she would do all the prep ahead of time for the sake of a certain little someone who couldn’t handle the smell.”

“Ah...haha...yeah, well, that wasn’t really necessary.” Jean was clearly taken aback but tried to keep up appearances by taking a massive bite of the meat. The look on his face told all as he forced the food down. Gadhio simply snorted and went back to his own meal.

After that exchange, silence fell over the party as they continued to eat, the only sound that of the crackling fire. It was a far cry from when Flum had been around, as she always worked hard to keep the conversation going and skillfully filled any awkward silences.

After dinner, provided there were no sudden attacks, the party would generally split up for some private time until bed. Cyrill, Linus, and Gadhio worked on their weapons, while Maria prayed to Origin and Eterna meditated. Jean usually spent his evenings nursing a cup of a sweet herbal tea while reading a magical tome. With Flum gone, though, there was no one to brew the tea for him.

With no other options, he dug through his bags for the components and started brewing it himself. Having lived the life of a gifted mage who later went on to work in a royal research institute, he was hardly accustomed to making his own tea. Making matters worse, he had no real idea how to do it.

After watching Jean struggle for some time, Linus finally made his way over. “Huh. So there *is* something the great and powerful Jean can’t do.”

“Shut up. This is hardly a task I usually perform myself.”

“You hoity-toity types are really a world apart, huh? Look, just give it here and I’ll make some tea.”

This served as a great annoyance to Jean. He—the greatest mage in the whole kingdom—had to have someone help him complete a task that even Flum could do unassisted! He tapped his foot impatiently, arms crossed, as he watched Linus go about his work.

“There, done.”

Jean took the still steaming teacup from Linus, took an impatient sip—and immediately spit it back out. “Good grief, this is disgusting.”

“What the hell? I go out of my way to make tea for you, and you’re gonna be a jerk about it? I made it the completely normal way!”

Jean let all the frustration he’d been harboring since dinner explode on Linus. “What do you expect me to do? It was disgusting and bitter. It even smells awful! How did you manage to make it taste so bad?”

Linus found this nothing short of absurd. The only crime he’d committed was making a good cup of tea. Sure, he understood that Jean had high standards, but this was a bit too much.

“Can you do anything right? Even making decent food seems like too much for you people,” Jean snarled.

That was the last straw. Linus lashed out, about to grab Jean when Eterna joined the two men. Her voice was calm and flat, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

“Flum made it up special for our little princey-poo here, I’d bet.”

With that, she skipped back off, leaving the two men behind. Jean steamed at her remark.

“Nnngrah! Flum this, Flum that! Why the hell is everything about that little useless piece of... Gah!”

He threw his teacup to the ground, sending shards of white porcelain everywhere and splashing the now-lukewarm liquid all over Linus’s feet. Then he stormed off, making no attempt to apologize for his outburst.

“W-wait up, Jean!”

Linus called after him, but he either didn’t hear or was too angry to care. With nothing else to do, he knelt to sweep up the pieces of the shattered teacup, muttering to himself as he did.

“This was a really nice cup, too. Probably just a drop in the bucket for someone like Jean, though.”

Once he’d gathered all the shattered porcelain, Linus wiped down his pant leg and stood by the fire to let it dry. As he stared vacantly into the dancing flames, an indescribable sadness washed over him.

Linus was an S-Rank adventurer, like Gadhio, but still only 24 years old. Ever since he was a child, he’d always been more gifted than his peers, and even at this young age, he’d experienced more than some people did in twice the time. Currently, his fine-tuned intuition was letting off warning bells.

The single most common reasons why parties fell apart wasn’t monster attacks or money troubles. It was interpersonal relationships.

“I just hope nothing truly terrible happens before we reach the Demon Lord’s castle.”

Even as Linus wished this with all his might, his ample experience told him things were unlikely to play out in their favor.

Chapter 3:

There Are Good People Out There!

Maybe We Have a Chance Yet?

F LUM AND MILKIT walked through the town, hand in hand. They weren't heading anywhere in particular, just trying to put as much distance between them and the merchant's house as possible. But the looks they got from passersby were decidedly cold. They were two young girls, dressed in little more than cloaks, with dirty faces and messy hair...and both bearing the mark of a slave on their faces, no less. Milkit could cover her mark with her bandages, but it wasn't hard to guess her status by the fact that she was together with Flum.

Still, Flum didn't get why people felt compelled to shoulder into them and sneer as they crossed paths. She finally spoke up as they weaved through the crowds.

"Is it always like this, Milkit? For slaves, I mean."

Milkit tilted her head to the side in thought. "What do you mean, 'like this'?"

That was all the answer Flum needed. Just a moment ago Milkit had nearly tumbled to the ground after someone tried to trip her, and yet, judging by her reaction, such cruel treatment was par for the course. Being a slave meant being despised.

Not just that—being a slave meant existing to fulfill others' wants and needs.

Flum self-consciously brought her hand up to her cheek, the soft flesh of her fingers running across the unnatural shape etched into her skin. Due to the special pigment brushed into the mark, it wouldn't disappear even if a heal spell were cast on her. Even though a whole week had passed since its infliction, it still stung when she touched it.

However, the pain she felt in her heart was far greater than the physical pain the mark left on her.

Milkit seemed to pick up on the dark look that had taken over Flum's expression. "Is something the matter, Master?"

"I was just realizing that I really am living the life of a slave."

Milkit cocked her head to the side again. "Oh?"

As someone who'd lived her entire life in bondage, Milkit probably couldn't comprehend where Flum was coming from. Sure, being kicked out of the party meant she was free of her duty to fell the Demon Lord. But the slave mark also meant she could never go home. In more than one way, the girl named Flum Apricot was now dead.

And yet, she was still alive. Here and now.

Flum walked a little faster, each footfall firm and confident. She wasn't alone, either.

"Well, if we're going to survive, we're going to need to earn some money."

"Hmm...I guess I'll just have to sell my body, Master. I've never done anything like that before, so I have to admit I'm a little nervous."

Flum let out a dramatic sigh. She couldn't believe the first idea to come out of her companion's mouth was prostitution. "Milkit, you need to respect yourself a little more than that, okay?"

"Respect myself? I don't understand."

"Selling your body should be the very last option."

"Well then, what should we do?"

Flum could think of only one place where she could find a job without anyone questioning her status. "Let's make our way to the West District. I'm sure we can get a job there."

Milkit seemed confused. "Will they give jobs to slaves?"

Flum squeezed the other girl's hand and picked up the pace. She'd understand once they got there.

The capital was divided into the Central, East, West, and North Districts. The

Central District was by far the largest, populated by businesses both large and small, and serving as home to many residents just off the main thoroughfare. Nobles and wealthy businessmen lived in the huge manors of the East District, while the North District was where the palace and other administrative arms of the government were located.

Now, the West District—that was where all the poor and downtrodden lived. The slave merchant's home had been in the western part of the Central District, nearly on the border with the West District.

About twenty minutes or so later, the two girls found themselves in front of the building Flum was looking for. Milkit gazed at the symbol etched into the sign hanging out front.

“This is...an adventurers' guild?”

Just as the name implied, this was a place where adventurers gathered in hopes of finding work. The term “adventurer” itself was a throwback to the days when the kingdom still consisted of wild, untamed territory. It was the name given to the brave people who sallied forth to clear out the monsters that roamed the lands.

“I heard there are a number of ex-slaves working as adventurers, and I figure I'm at least decent at fighting. At the very least, we should be able to take on some of the simpler jobs.” Flum had gained some confidence after her encounter with the ghouls and the merchant.

“You were able to take down those ghouls with relative ease, Master, so that should help earn our keep. But I'm still not sure I understand how your injuries were instantly cured the moment you grasped the sword or how you were able to swing it around with ease.”

“Like he said, it is an Epic weapon. I think that played a part, at least. Maybe the sword's enchantments increased its abilities?”

“But the man who touched it melted away.”

“I've been wondering about that, too. Unfortunately, I have no skill with magic. Even Scan is beyond me.” If she could cast Scan, she could use it to ascertain the sword's name and any enchantments it had. “Actually, now that I

think about it, my body feels lighter, and my magic seems to have increased. How strange...”

Though Flum had never actually used magic herself, she knew how to do it in theory.

“C’mere for a second...”

Flum tugged at Milkit’s hand and pulled the younger girl into a small alley next to the adventurers’ guild. After making sure no one was looking, she summoned forth the blade. A swathe of light blossomed from her hand and slowly took the shape of a sword.

Once the surprise that it had actually worked wore off, she took a deep breath and tried to cast Scan.

Broken into its most basic components, all one needed to do to cast a spell was to summon the magic within them, call forth the spell, and focus on their target. Flum had tried this countless times in the past with little success, but now, she felt a shapeless entity flowing through her, almost like smoke. Her lips curved into an ecstatic smile.

In her sixteen years of life, she had never once been able to summon forth the power that she knew resided within her body, no matter how hard she tried. However, it dissipated just as quickly as it had gathered once she stopped concentrating.

Flum quickly forced herself to focus again and called forth the spell. “Scan!” Suddenly words and images began appearing at the periphery of her vision.

Name: Souleater Zweihänder

Tier: Epic

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Strength by 318]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Magic by 96]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Endurance by 293]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Agility by 181]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Perception by 107]

[This equipment causes its wearer's body to melt]

"Souleater...?"

That was an apt name for such a cursed weapon.

As far as Flum could tell, it had originally been just a dual-handed sword called Zweihänder. Cursed weapons were usually inhabited by angry spirits who rejected all who tried to wield them, their power growing stronger and stronger with each person that died while holding them.

"But...that doesn't make any sense. All of its enchantments decrease stats. There's no way that I should be able to use this sword."

"Decrease stats?"

"At least as far as I can tell, yeah. Do you want to Scan it for yourself?"

"I can't use magic..."

That didn't sound right. The only reason why Flum wasn't able to use magic was because all of her stats were stuck at zero. Even a single point in magic was enough for anyone to cast a low-level spell like Scan.

That is, unless...

No one had ever bothered to teach Milkit even the simplest of spells.

"Besides, it wouldn't do me any good anyway. I don't know how to read..."

This stung Flum for a moment as she realized just how lucky she'd been growing up. "Don't worry, Milkit, I'll teach you. Once things settle down a bit, we'll study together."

Milkit stared blankly at Flum, neither returning nor rejecting her cheerful grin. After a few moments, she looked away. Her eyes betrayed her confusion.

"If...if that is what you desire, Master."

She sounded pretty pessimistic, but Flum chalked that up to the other girl's personality.

“Then it’s decided! Just leave it to me, I’ll teach ya to read, Milkit.” Flum puffed out her chest. “...But this still doesn’t make sense. If this sword is supposed to lower your stats and cause your body to melt as soon as you touch it, why did it make me stronger and heal me?”

“If we could figure that out, then we’d know how to make you stronger, Master.”

“Stats that should have been lowered rise, flesh that was supposed to disintegrate was healed... Hmm...”

“It’s like everything was the opposite of how it should have been.”

“Right? A real change in direction...”

A change in direction...or, in other words, a reversal.

Reversal. Flum’s rare affinity...

The hex that’d hung over Flum her whole life. The useless affinity that turned all of her stats to zero—or so she’d thought. Now her stats were actually increasing, which could only mean...

“So maybe this useless affinity isn’t so useless after all?”

“Your affinity?”

“You see, I have a rare affinity called Reversal. It’s kept all my stats at zero my whole life, so I’d always figured it was useless. However, it looks like there is some way I can make use of it!”

Negative effects were turned into positive ones, flesh that should have melted away was healed. In other words, curses were reversed to be blessings.

“I always wondered why I had such a useless power, but...wow! I never thought I could use cursed weapons, so I didn’t even try. Hahaha!” Flum laughed to herself, lost in her excitement. Milkit just stared at her blankly. “Ah, sorry ’bout that, Milkit. I got a bit excited there. You see, thanks to my affinity, the deadlier a curse is, the stronger it actually makes me!”

“Ah, I...I don’t really understand. But that’s impressive, Master.”

Her reaction left a lot to be desired. Then again, the two had only just met,

and Milkit didn't seem all that good at expressing emotion. Flum was a little gutted that Milkit couldn't share in her excitement, but this wasn't really the time or place for that, anyway.

First, they needed money so they could at least have a roof over their heads tonight.

To register at the adventurers' guild, you needed to take on and complete a simple F-Rank job. Once you did that, you'd receive your license and would be able to take on more jobs, which would provide you with a fairly stable source of income.

The girls exited the alley and entered the guild with renewed excitement.

Even the most charitable of people would have a hard time describing the guild's interior as anything but disgusting. The fact that it reeked of alcohol even in the early afternoon didn't help matters. The building included a small bar, ostensibly as a place to introduce adventurers to possible party fellow members. It was currently full of several muscle-bound men who immediately broke out into perverse grins when they saw Fran and Milkit's slave markings.

Fortunately, the reception desk was straight ahead. The counter was manned by a young woman in gaudy makeup who was picking at her nails. She looked annoyed when she finally noticed Flum approaching her.

"What're you doing here, slave? I'm guessing your master didn't send you here on an errand, by the looks of it."

"I want to be an adventurer. Could you issue me a license?"

The receptionist and the men in the bar broke out in laughter at this.

"Oh, bless your heart. You want to throw your life away? Listen, girly, I think you two would be better suited to a job that involves lying on your back. I don't know about that little oddball over there with the bandages, but you're young. I'm sure you could sell yourself for a fair bit. How about I introduce you to something more suited to you two?" The mocking smile on her face spoke volumes.

Flum somehow contained the rage she felt building within her when she heard the drunks chime in, too.

“That brown-haired broad ain’t too bad lookin’. I wouldn’t mind taking her home for the night. Gonna have to pass on mummy girl, though.”

“Hard pass here, too!”

“What about you, think you could do that little monster thing?”

“No way, man! Well, I dunno actually. I haven’t got one off in a while...”

“Gyahahaha! Even a stray mutt could get you goin’!”

“As long as she ain’t got no diseases or nothin’.”

“You’re really thinkin’ about it, aren’t ya! Wauhahaha!”

Flum ground her teeth and clenched her fists until her knuckles went white. They’d gone too far now. She took a step forward to give them a piece of her mind but then felt Milkit tug at her shirt and shake her head.

“Why not?!”

“There’s nothing for you to win here, Master. It’s best to just let it go.”

“I’m not just mad about what they said about you, Milkit. I’m downright pissed that they’d talk about me like that, too!”

This wasn’t true, of course. Most of her anger was aimed at what they’d said about Milkit, and they both knew it.

“Joking aside, they did say they’d pay you for your services. Why not take them up on their offer? It’s easy money, kid.”

“No thanks.”

“Your loss.” With that, the receptionist turned back to the paperwork in front of her and resumed her work.

“Hey, uh, wait a minute. Didn’t I just ask you to issue me a license?”

Silence. The woman didn’t even bother to respond.

“Listen to me!!”

“God, shut up, kid. I don’t have any jobs for unappreciative slaves who don’t know a good offer when it smacks them in the face. Just go spread ’em for the guys over there, okay?”

The woman's patronizing tone was Flum's breaking point. She lunged toward the counter and was about to grab the woman when a man walked over from the bar area to try and defuse the situation.

"Whoa, whoa, no need to talk like that."

He was about a head taller than Flum and sported a thin, muscular build. His close-cropped dirty-blond hair gave him a rather clean-cut look. Though an expensive-looking sword hung from his waist, he wasn't wearing armor.

"Sorry for butting in like this, little lady. My name is Dein Phineas, A-Rank adventurer in this here guild. Nice to meet you."

He offered his hand. Flum eyed him with some suspicion before returning the gesture and gripping his large, calloused palm. Though the expression on his face was gentle, the scar on his cheek and his powerful gaze betrayed his true abilities. He was, after all, an A-Rank adventurer.

All adventurers started out at F-Rank, no matter what. As they collected more and more bounties, they slowly moved up the ranks and were trusted with higher and higher paying jobs. It wasn't a profession for the faint of heart.

"We finally got a newbie coming all the way out to the guild in this dangerous hellhole we call the West District, Y'lla. You should be nicer to her."

"But..."

"After she gets her license, whether she lives or dies is all on her. Personally, I think we should leave the door wide open for anyone to join, slave or noble alike."

"If you say so, Dein."

It was clear that this Dein person was a pretty influential member of the guild, considering how quickly Y'lla caved in despite her sass just moments ago. Dein leaned on the counter and tapped his finger on a paper sitting on the desk in front of Y'lla. "What about this one?"

Y'lla hesitated for a moment. "I dunno about that..."

However, she didn't seem to want to say no to Dein. She finally nodded in agreement and slid the paper across the counter toward Flum. "*Deliver one (1)*"

werewolf fang” was written across the top, Rank-F.

Y’lla then handed her a map marked with where the monsters could be found. “Once you finish this job, I’ll issue you a license.”

“Thanks.” Flum mumbled a curt response and took the map from the glowering receptionist. If she ever wanted to make it as an adventurer, the two would probably be stuck working together for quite a while yet. She held back an exasperated sigh at the thought that she’d already made an enemy.

She turned toward the A-Rank adventurer and bowed her head. “Thank you... Dein, was it? It’s thanks to you that I’ll finally be able to get a license.”

He smiled warmly. “It was nothing, don’t worry about it.”

And with that, he returned to his table in the bar to sit down with some fellow adventurers. Flum watched him for a bit before turning back to Milkit. “Well, I guess we should get going.”

“As you wish, Master.”

She instinctively reached down and took Milkit’s hand as she led the way out of the guild. They were off to the werewolves’ stomping grounds, as indicated on her map.

Dein maintained his charming grin until the two girls were out of sight. The moment they were gone, he broke into a chuckle.

One of the other men at the table quickly spoke up. “What was that all about, Dein?”

“Didn’t you see? I was just helping someone get their first job, is all. I’m a real nice guy, I’ll have you know.”

“You’re so full of it, your eyes are brown. There’s something special about the job you picked, isn’t there?”

“Well...y’know, I figured I’d raise the bar a bit just to make sure the guild newbies are up to snuff.” Dein pounded back a glass full of white liquor.

“Fwaaah. Them’s the rules, yah? In order to get a license, you need to complete an F-Rank job.”

“That’s true, yeah...”

“All I did was give her a tougher job.”

“How tough?”

“Just a little bit. A smidge, really. I just marked a D-Rank job down to an F-Rank, is all. If she has any talent at all, taking down a werewolf should be a breeze. At least, it would be for me.”

The other man’s face tensed. “Aren’t D-Rank jobs reserved for monsters that are three, sometimes even five times as powerful as F-Rank jobs? Those girls are as good as dead.”

“If that’s the case, well, so be it. Guess that means they weren’t made of the right stuff.”

“Gahaha! Yer never gonna change, Dein!”

The men raised a quick toast to the demise of the two slave girls and continued on with their boisterous drinking.

Dein Phineas was best known around these parts as the Intrepid Scoundrel. He colluded with the guild to turn a tidy profit on high-value jobs by getting groups of adventurers together and then claiming a part of their reward money for himself. Through this, and other illicit means, he’d managed to achieve A-Rank despite having none of the requisite skills.

Meanwhile, Flum and Milkit walked hand in hand out of town toward the location marked on their map, completely unknowing of the heinous nature of the man who’d sent them on their mission.

Chapter 4:

This Job'll Be a Cakewalk!

AFTER EXITING through the western gate, the two walked for around an hour before arriving at their destination—the woods. Flum was feeling fine, thanks to the endurance-enhancing effect of her sword, but Milkit looked like she was nearing her limit.

“Wanna take a break before we head in?”

“Please don’t worry about me, Master.”

“We’re taking a break.”

Milkit reached up and fiddled with her bandages, something of a nervous gesture of hers. She hadn’t accidentally betrayed her true feelings, had she? In any case, it changed nothing. If Flum wanted to take a rest, then that’s what they’d do. She obediently followed her master to some tree stumps near the outer perimeter of the woods.

Flum sat on a stump and let her legs dangle, feeling the tips of the grass brush against her feet as the wind blew across them. She gazed absently up at the sky. Finally, her heart was at ease. But that feeling wouldn’t last. Not for long. She should enjoy it while she could.

But she couldn’t relax with Milkit just standing there like that. Flum patted the wood next to her.

“No need to concern yourself, Master.”

“Watching you stand there is causing me concern. Now hurry up and sit down.”

“Is that an order?”

“Sure, whatever. Now sit.”

With that flustered command issued, Milkit sat down on the stump, being mindful to keep her distance from Flum. Flum was a bit perturbed by the space

but figured this was a fair compromise.

Finally, Milkit's voice broke the silence. "Master...?"

She sounded like something was bothering her.

"Yeah?"

"Does my appearance bother you?" The bandages over her lips moved as she spoke, causing them to rustle against the other dried bandages around her face.

Flum answered honestly. There was no sense in hiding how she felt. "It does, actually. It's kinda weird looking."

Some parts of the bandages were stained red and black, and unhealthy-looking skin peeked from the gaps between the cloth. Even though she knew that Milkit was a girl around her own age, there was just something incredibly disconcerting about her appearance.

"Then why did you bring me with you?"

"I felt bad just leaving you all alone there."

"In that case, I don't think a cold, quiet person like myself is a good fit for you, Master. Perhaps you should just sell me and purchase another slave?"

Milkit was so incredibly pessimistic that it was actually quite annoying. She was technically correct, though: there was no real reason for Flum to keep her around. They'd merely happened to be in the same cage and happened to both survive their ordeal. And yet, Flum felt a sense of responsibility toward Milkit. Like she needed the younger girl with her.

"Well...maybe I'm not all that saintly, I guess."

"Are you referring to the reason why you brought me along?"

Flum answered as honestly as she could, "Right. I was useless and couldn't do anything for the people around me... In fact, that's why I was sold off as a slave. I figured that if I could take you, someone worse off than me, and actually make you happy, then maybe—just maybe, something good would come of my being born into this world. I think there was a bit of selfishness in there, as well."

The more she thought about it, the more she realized just how true her words

were. She'd wanted to save Milkit from the depths of hell. Maybe she still longed to call herself a hero. Maybe, deep within, she'd wanted to gain back the confidence she lost after being dismissed from the party and sold into the bonds of slavery.

"I can't say I completely understand it, but regardless of your reasoning, Master, are you saying that you're trying to make me happy? If that's the case, then you really should just sell me. I'm not the right slave for that."

"You've already accepted me as your master, right? Then it's too late. I'm not interested in trading you in."

"In that case..." Milkit reached one hand back behind her head and began undoing the bandage.

"Ah..."

The sound escaped Flum's lips before she even realized it. The sight was pretty grotesque. From chin to forehead, Milkit's entire face was puffy, red, and mottled. The skin was swollen and inflamed in some places and peeling away in others, with a translucent liquid oozing from the open wounds.

"Do you still want to keep me around?" Milkit didn't look particularly bothered by the prospect of being discarded by Flum. Maybe she felt that it wasn't quite fair to keep disguising herself—that if she didn't show Flum everything about her, she would be betraying her master.

Flum stood in stunned silence, her hand over her mouth. The world seemed to spin around her as a tangle of thoughts ran through her head. Sickening, painful, grotesque, pitiful...beautiful eyes. Alas, none of these words would mean much to Milkit, even if she did give them voice.

There was one useful fact amidst the flurry, however. Eterna had taught her about herbal remedies on their travels, and she distantly remembered mention of a special condition where only the skin of the face was affected.

"Could this be the effects of mustardo toxins?"

"Moostar...?" Milkit looked back at her blankly.

"Hold still, okay?"

If she was right, then that'd mean that most of the pain was gone by now. Flum reached up to touch Milkit's face to see if she was, in fact, suffering from the effects of mustardo toxins. However, Milkit quickly stood up and turned away before she made contact.

"You musn't touch my face, Master. You might catch it, too."

"Mustardo toxin can't be transmitted from one person to another."

"I was told that my condition can, so perhaps you're wrong about this toxin, Master."

"Who told you that?"

"My previous master. I was told that once another person caught it, it could never be cured. Therefore, I must never let another person touch my face."

Flum's outstretched hand curled into a fist, her nails biting into her palm.

The world really was full of absolutely disgusting people. And it was always the weak and downtrodden innocents who became their victims. The villains continued to live lives of leisure while the ones they hurt struggled, suffered, and died, even their deaths becoming fodder for their murderers' entertainment.

What allowed this to keep happening? Or rather—would *she* allow it to keep happening?

"Lies! Those bastards do nothing but lie!"

There was no one around for Flum to take out her anger on, though she was furious enough to rip someone in two, given the chance. Alas, the only ones here were the victims of these heinous acts. All they could do was lick their wounds and try to comfort each other.

Flum stood up and pulled Milkit close, hugging her tightly. The other girl tried to resist, but Flum wasn't concerned—there was no disease to be transmitted. She pressed her cheek against Milkit's.

"No, Master, please don't do that. If you do wind up catching it, you'll be just as hideous as me." This was the first time Flum had heard any emotion in Milkit's voice.

“I don’t care!”

Flum raised her voice, hoping it might help dispel Milkit’s concerns.

“Listen closely. I intend to be your master, Milkit. Maybe you would run if my face looked like that, but all you’ve done is further cement my determination.”

“That was never my intention, Master. But since you said you wanted to make me happy, I figured I should tell you that my previous master already told me my face will never heal. I just didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“I can’t believe he’d say something like that. I mean, sure, this is beyond what healing magic can do, but still...”

Most injuries and illnesses in the kingdom were treated not by doctors but by priests and shrine maidens. Those with a light affinity used healing magic, which could cure most ailments without the need for medicine or other surgical procedures. Thanks to the spread of healing magic, the average life expectancy of those living in the kingdom had rapidly increased.

Magic, however, was far from a panacea. There were still ailments out there that couldn’t be cured, and the skin inflammation caused by mustardo toxins was one of them.

“But there is a way to heal you, Milkit. It’s actually quite simple, too. Even if magic can’t heal you, there’s medicine out there that can.”

“You are certainly very knowledgeable, Master. But aren’t the medicine men all gone now?”

Milkit was correct. The church believed that the Pontiff, a long-standing position passed from father to son, should possess the only healing powers in the land. Deciding, thus, to destroy the medical practitioners of the land, the church had first used its power and influence to disrupt their practices before finally convincing the king to make it law.

The followers of Origin—which included the vast majority of the kingdom’s residents—believed everything the church told them. The priests told their congregations that turning their backs on medical practitioners proved their faith in Origin, and as a result, the vast majority of practitioners in the land were forced to shutter their businesses.

However, their teachings lived on. Before she was sent on her journey to overthrow the Demon Lord, there was a young mage who'd lived all alone in a secluded area largely beyond the church's reach. The medical knowledge and techniques that were on the verge of being lost forever lived on in her—in the mind of Eterna Rinebow.

Travelling alongside Eterna on their journey to the Demon Lord, Flum had tried to learn everything she could from her about magic and medicinal herbs in the hopes of making herself more useful to the party. They'd only spent a short time together, so she didn't even know where to start when it came to compounding medicine herself, but she had at least learned enough to be able to identify the source of a problem from its symptoms.

"I know the components we'll need to treat you. Once I settle into life as an adventurer, we'll start getting them together, and I'll see if I can call on an acquaintance to help me make the medicine."

Now whether Eterna—a woman who had so easily agreed to Flum being sold into a life of bondage—would even agree to help her out remained to be seen. But Flum remembered her as an easygoing woman who was kind and quick to share her wisdom, and as useless as Flum may have been, she'd tried her best to build decent relationships with the other heroes. Or at least, she thought she had. At this point, she doubted how close she had ever really gotten to any of them.

She would never really know the answer unless she asked Eterna herself. For now, Flum decided to just stay positive and believe that she'd help them. They had enough working against them as it was. She chose to have faith.

She and Milkit finally broke their embrace.

"First things first, we need to get through today."

"You're right, Master. If we spend too long here, night will be upon us."

Flum smiled brightly at Milkit, causing the slave girl to shyly avert her gaze. It was rather cute, actually. She helped Milkit bandage her face back up before the two girls made their way into the forest, off to find the werewolves that apparently lived within its confines.

The forest was dim, with only a few rays of light peeking through the dense foliage above. The air felt damp and cool on their exposed skin. The ground was moist and sank beneath their feet, as if it were moments from trying to suck them in. Flum gripped Milkit's hand a little tighter to keep her companion from tripping as they proceeded deeper and deeper into the woods.

This was going to be the first time that she actually used her cursed sword in real combat. In fact, it would be the first time she'd even battled a monster. Flum's heart raced in her chest, fear creeping over her as she questioned how good an idea this was. Her feet felt heavy as they plodded forward.

However, the warmth of Milkit's hand in hers brought forth a desire...a sense of duty to protect her young companion. The gentle, innocent warmth that emanated from Milkit's hand into hers pushed her fears to the back of her mind and gave her a renewed sense of courage.

About fifteen minutes after they'd entered the forest, Flum finally stopped. Some distance behind them, she could still see the faint light of the "entrance" of sorts where they found a break in the tree line. She pulled Milkit behind a tree and brought her index finger to her lips.

She had just spotted a pack of three wolves walking along on the path ahead.

Grey Wolf

Affinity: Earth

Strength: 108

Magic: 9

Endurance: 61

Agility: 109

Perception: 98

Each one had a combined stat value of 385—and were E-Rank monsters.

Thanks to the boost from her Souleater blade, Flum's stats were locked in at an impressive 995. As long as she kept her cool, she should be able to take them down without a problem. However, she'd been told she was out looking for F-Rank monsters, which were a fair bit weaker than these grey wolves here. This wasn't exactly the ideal situation to get her practice in. Milkit's shoes were pretty much torn to shreds and weren't exactly good for moving around stealthily.

Just then, the wolves suddenly stopped and looked in Flum's direction. Trying to get Milkit out of here was no longer an option. Flum decided it'd probably be wiser to draw the enemies to her, rather than turn her back on them and run. She gestured to Milkit to wait behind the tree for her.

Looking up at the sky, she drew a deep breath. Just as she let it out, the wolves began to growl. They arched their backs in unison and lunged toward the still unarmed Flum, who clearly presented a tempting target.

As soon as the three wolves were in range, Flum summoned forth her blade.

“Hyaaaah!!”

FWOP!

The black blade cut straight through the wolves' heads, not just severing flesh, but even cracking their skulls, sending brain matter in every direction. The three wolves dropped instantaneously to the ground.

“Hah...hah...hah...”

Flum’s hand trembled. She, a girl who had been useless in a fight her entire life, had now taken a life in combat. This thought ignited a fire in her heart. Her shoulders trembled as she tried to steady her breathing.

Insects were already descending upon the corpses to feast on their still-warm flesh. In a matter of time, the wolves’ bodies would be returned to the forest.

Milkit called out, her voice devoid of any emotion as usual. “Quite impressive, Master.”

The seemingly empty compliment was like a splash of cold water, putting an end to the excitement welling up in Flum. She turned toward Milkit and reached out her hand. “Let’s get going.”

These weren’t the monsters they were looking for. However, if she was able to so easily slay these E-Rank monsters, then the F-Rank ones she was looking for should be no problem.

Her confidence renewed, the two moved deeper into the woods.

It took another 20 minutes before they encountered the monster they were looking for.

“There it is,” Flum whispered to avoid drawing the attention of the bipedal wolf up ahead. It appeared to be looking for its next meal.

“You know, Master, I can’t actually fight. Is it really best for me to be all the way out here?”

While her observation was certainly spot on, it was a little too late for that now. Flum leaned in close to Milkit and whispered in her ear, careful to not make any more noise than was absolutely necessary.

“I originally planned to leave you behind in the capital to wait for me, but to be honest, humans are probably more dangerous than these monsters.”

If she left Milkit, a slave, alone in town—they might never see each other again. Weighed against the risks of being attacked by a monster, the forest seemed like a safer place for Milkit to be.

“That may be true, but I still can’t be of any help to you here.”

“Just keep yourself safe. Run, if you have to. I’m pretty sure you can escape from an F-Rank monster. We’ll come up with a strategy for what to do next time, later.”

For now, they really just needed money to put a roof over their heads tonight. Before she did anything else, Flum decided to scan the werewolf. Words and numbers filled her peripheral vision.

Werewolf

Affinity: Earth

Strength: 159

Magic: 22

Endurance: 79

Agility: 207

Perception: 54

After taking in the stats, she felt an indignant rage rise up within her.

“That bastard Dein. He wasn’t trying to help us at all—he was sending us into a trap!”

“What is it?”

“The werewolf has a total stat value of 521. Any monsters over the 500 line are considered D-Rank monsters.”

“But weren’t you sent out after an F-Rank monster?”

“We were tricked by Dein and the guild.”

Sending a new adventurer off to fight a D-Rank monster was essentially sentencing them to death. Even with a well-formed plan of attack, your chances of victory were slim at best. Dein and the guild were trying to kill her and Milkit.

“Unfortunately for them, I’m no pushover.”

Thanks to the Zweihänder’s stat boost, Flum was more powerful than a mere D-Rank monster. In fact, she was nearly on par with C-Rank monsters—defined by having a total stat value of 1,000. Moreover, the blade had a curative effect on her body.

This werewolf should be no problem.

Flum concentrated and summoned forth her blade. A moment later, she felt the heft of the sword in her hand. She gripped the hilt tightly in her hand and began to close in on the werewolf.

She locked her feet and was about to unleash a powerful strike when, suddenly, she heard Milkit frantically call out to her.

“Master, look!”

In the direction Milkit was pointing, she spotted another werewolf.

In fact—she spotted another two coming from different directions, making for a total of four werewolves all descending on the same spot.

The most dangerous thing D-Rank monsters could do was come together and attack as a pack. In fact, there was a popular saying among adventurers that if you saw one, you should assume there were another three nearby. Even with Flum’s impressive stat buffs, fighting four D-Rank monsters at once greatly reduced her odds of victory. She’d need to split them up somehow.

Flum eyed her opponents warily. One of the werewolves shook its head from side to side and began to look around. It must’ve caught her scent or heard her movements. The other three immediately went on guard and began to look around them, too.

Flum and Milkit ducked behind the trees, hoping to wait the werewolves out until they calmed down.

Before that could happen, however, a sudden blast of wind burst through the forest, shaking the trees and showering them in leaves. The suddenness of it all caused Flum to cry out.

“Ack!”

She held her arm over her face to protect it from the blowing debris and risked a look in the werewolves’ direction. She was shocked to see the severed lower half of a werewolf body in the clearing. And even more so to see a huge, lion-like creature munching on the severed upper torso.

The new creature had massive, bird-like wings growing out of its back. The other werewolves launched at it but were easily dispatched with a swipe of its powerful paw, sending them crashing into nearby trees before the creature closed in to eat its latest victims.

“Scan!”

Flum had never seen a monster like this before. She immediately checked its stats.

Anzu

Affinity: Wind

Strength: 542

Magic: 408

Endurance: 301

Agility: 422

Perception: 214

Its stats were nearly twice that of Flum's, at 1887.

"C-Rank?! No way..."

There was no way she could win against this thing. Her only choice was to try and escape before it found them.

Alas, hiding in the shadow of a tree was hardly enough to keep the monster from sensing their presence. The anzu had already noticed them. Shreds of flesh dribbled from its mouth as it fixed its beady black eyes in the two girls' direction. A deep growl reverberated deep in the monster's throat as it began to flap its wings, whipping up a localized wind storm in the middle of the clearing.

It was readying to strike.

"Milkit!!" Flum moved instinctively, shoving Milkit away. At least...at least one of them could survive, maybe.

"Eeek!" Milkit tumbled to the ground before readjusting herself and staring up at her master.

The anzu let out a roar as it gave its wings one more furious flap, summoning up a powerful magic attack. The wind formed into strong gusts as sharp as a blade, tearing up the earth in their wake as they closed in on Flum.

There was nowhere to run.

The trees around them were smashed to little more than splinters. Flum's

arms and legs flew off in every direction, plumes of blood marking their flight through the air.

Chapter 5:

Not Exactly a Walk in the Park

FLUM'S BODY was cut to shreds, limbs and chunks of her body flying off in all directions.

Milkit screamed at the sight. "Master?!"

It was the first time the cool and collected girl had showed such emotion. Arms, legs, head, torso... Flum's body was split into six distinct pieces that all slammed into the ground with a wet thud. The thick blood that poured from her wounds was hungrily sucked up by the moist earth beneath her.

"Aaaaaaaaah!!!"

Milkit stood locked in place. The shock of seeing Flum die so easily right in front of her eyes was too much to bear.

The anzu gave a loud snort, as if pleased with its work, before turning its black eyes to the lone survivor. Its mouth curled up into a sinister grin as it spied its prey, exposed fangs still soaked in the blood of the fallen werewolves.

It seemed to be telling Milkit that this was where she would die.

She didn't particularly care about death, whether another's or her own. Her life, after all, carried no real value. The beast sitting across the clearing from her stood at least four meters tall and sported claws that looked like they could rip right through any armor, massive fangs, and powerful magic. Any attack it made would prove fatal to Milkit, making it pointless to even bother to fight.

It wasn't even the will to live that screamed at her to run, just the desire to get out of this place. Milkit willed her body to move, but it was to no avail.

"Grooooooooooar!!!" The anzu let out a mighty roar and dove straight toward its prey. The ground shook as each paw slammed down with immense force. All Milkit could do in the face of the monstrosity closing in on her was pull her arms in front of her head and duck down.

THWUMP!

It barely missed her as it ran past. She could feel its fur graze her arms. The ground groaned beneath the immense weight of the beast as it landed and screeched to a halt.

Milkit's heart was now racing in her chest, and her ears were ringing. She began to hyperventilate from the shock of it all. She was still terrified, but her body seemed to be responding again. The odds of her being able to escape were miniscule at best, but it was better than nothing. She had to at least try.

She stumbled over the moist ground of the forest, struggling to keep from falling as she ran as fast as she could. With almost no practice at running to draw on, she struggled to keep her movements and breathing under control, with the end result that she moved at little more than a fast jog.

The anzu seemed to pick up on this, realizing that she posed no threat. No, she was a snack—or possibly, a plaything. A sinister grin once again graced its lips. Rather than attacking her outright, it began to slowly close in on her.

Milkit collapsed to the ground with a shout and resorted to crawling. The anzu reached out with its claw, swiping just close enough to rip her clothes. The young slave girl let out an ear-piercing scream. Her whole body trembled in terror.

Like a bully torturing ants, the anzu seemed to take great pleasure in her fear. If it were human, it would almost certainly be cackling right now.

Alas, Milkit had very little stamina to begin with, and it was only a matter of time until the exertion laid her out. The anzu watched, growing increasingly bored as her strength drained from her body. It was about time that she went from plaything to lunch.

It readied itself to lunge forward.

“That hurt, ya know.”

Someone grabbed the anzu's tail.

“Seriously, that really, really hurt. But I guess I should be awed by the power of Epic equipment. With my head and my heart still intact, it had me back to normal in just a matter of time.”

The anzu's tail was incredibly sensitive. The creature bared its fangs, but before it could turn to face whoever was holding it, they acted first.

"And now here you are, toying with a weak little girl?"

Flum brought her sword down in one quick motion, cleanly severing the anzu's tail from its body.

"Grooooooooooaaaar!!!!" The beast dove forward as the agony spread through its tailbone. It landed with a heavy thud and fell over onto its side, its legs kicking pathetically at the air.

Flum was instantly next to it, her sword raised high in the air. Her shoulders still weren't fully healed; blood pumped from the open wounds where her arms were loosely connected to her body. Her face contorted in pain as she expelled a heavy breath and bit her lip hard, bringing the sword down on the anzu's hind legs.

"Gyaaaaaaugh!!" The blade carved a deep red gash and sent blood shooting through the air. The anzu cried out and kicked furiously, toppling nearby trees in the process.

"See, it hurts, doesn't it? But that's just a taste of what you did to me. You sliced and diced me up, you know, and I'm not even fully healed. And it still really hurts, dammit!"

Flum knew that the words probably had no meaning to the anzu, but she couldn't stop herself from venting her frustration. When the magic had cut her into pieces, Flum was sure she was dead. She could feel consciousness slipping from her and the world growing cold as her blood drained away. She was resigned to her own demise. Now, if Milkit would just run...

Much to her surprise, however, her blood stopped flowing, and she felt a magical connection between her severed body parts. Some invisible force began to pull them together and, before she knew it, the wounds started to heal.

It took quite a bit longer than it had to restore the parts of her body that had been eaten by the ghouls, but regardless, she was still alive. Excepting a mortal wound to her head or heart, Flum figured she couldn't be killed. At least not by

losing her head and limbs.

“Grrrrr...graaaaaaaoooooll!”

The anzu slowly stood and turned to face Flum. It moved a lot more gingerly than it had before, and blood soaked its fur from the open wound in its leg. Even for a monster of its size, this was a critical injury.

Behind the anzu, Milkit clasped her hands to her chest, the sense of relief evident on her face. “I’m so glad you’re safe, Master.”

“Get out of here, Milkit!”

“Understood. Please don’t do anything too rash, Master.”

With that, Milkit hurried off in the direction they came from. That took care of one of Flum’s concerns. Now, she could concentrate on the battle at hand.

She laughed darkly and muttered to herself. “Not doing anything rash isn’t really an option. Not against this thing.”

The anzu paid no attention to the fleeing slave girl, its attention now entirely focused on Flum. She evaluated her situation.

“With its leg out of commission, speed’s on my side. I can probably dodge its claws and fangs, so as long as I keep an eye out for its magic attacks...I might just have a chance.”

She figured it would need some time to gather enough wind for another long-distance magic attack like the one it used to chop her up earlier. If she kept that in mind and kept her movements unpredictable, then it shouldn’t be able to land another direct hit on her.

Flum slowly edged to her opponent’s right, being mindful to keep her distance. The anzu matched her pace, slowly adjusting its body to keep facing her, though its strength was draining the longer this went on and more blood gushed from its leg. Her attempts to continue to buy time only served to frustrate the beast.

The monster stabbed its claws deep into the earth, possibly preparing to lunge. Flum steeled herself for the attack.

However...

“Gwaaaaaaaaaar!”

It didn’t lunge forward, as she had expected, but up.

A mighty gust of wind blasted past Flum. She looked up to see the anzu soaring high in the sky, its wings beating powerfully.

“It’s flying?!”

Anzu generally couldn’t fly for long periods of time. Rather, they used their wings for gliding and to assist them when jumping. They could however, fly in short bursts.

Flum struggled to keep sight of the anzu through the gaps in the trees as it swooped through the sky. Thanks to its aerial advantage, however, the anzu had a perfect lock on Flum’s position. At what it judged to be just the right timing, it swooped down toward its prey at incredible speed.

Fwoooooooooo!

The wind displaced by its steep dive created an ominous sound, which tipped Flum off to the impending strike and allowed her to dive out of the way. The anzu hit the ground with immense force, its claws driving deep into the soil. The blast of air from the impact blew out a shower of leaves, knocked down several rotten trees, and left a massive circular crater in the ground.

And yet, it had completely missed its target.

Having only narrowly escaped the strike zone, Flum lunged back in for another strike at the monster.

Whoooosh! A powerful gust of wind blew out from where the anzu had been.

“No way...”

A chill ran up her spine, but it was too late to stop. She was already committed to her lunge.

The previous attack hadn’t been a mere aerial assault, as she’d thought. The anzu had summoned a wind attack as it came down, and as soon as it touched the ground, it let out a massive burst of air in all directions.

Flum stabbed her sword into the ground and held on tight as she weathered

this sudden storm. “Gah! I thought I was keeping an eye on its magic, but I didn’t expect this! Gyauuh!”

A large tree toppled over and struck Flum from behind. The pain she felt was intense, almost as if she’d shattered her spine, but by the time she hit the ground and the tree rolled off her, she was fully healed.

As the haze over her vision cleared, she caught sight of the anzu’s claws sweeping a hair’s breadth away from her face. Flum struggled quickly to her feet, only to topple over again.

SMASH!

She heard the sound of a tree being reduced to firewood behind her. If that blow had hit her, there’d be nothing but chunks of meat left—and there’d be no coming back from that one. Having experienced it once, the very idea of death made her sick to her stomach.

Struggling back to her feet, Flum came to the alarming realization that she was no longer holding her sword. She looked down to see that the rune traced on her palm was glowing.

That was right—when an Epic weapon lost contact with its owner, it immediately returned to its parallel dimension.

Flum concentrated on her palm and summoned forth the Souleater again.

“You...you know, I’m r-r-really beginning to love th-this Epic equipment.”

She was still catching her breath as she wrapped both hands around the Souleater’s hilt and faced down the anzu. Flum reminded herself to be careful of its magic, as well as its many other forms of attack. It had short-and long-range options available to it, making it exceedingly unlikely that she was going to get out of this unscathed.

As far as she could see, there was only one opening here for a novice fighter like her: put her own body on the line—flesh, bone, and all.

“My strength is in my...well, my body.”

She balked at the thought of feeling such incredible agony again but knew she would heal from pretty much anything short of a truly mortal wound. All she

had to do was take advantage of that.

“I really, really do hate pain. But if I die, Milkit’s pretty much a goner, too. In that case, well...I guess it’s about time to make good on that dream of being a hero, huh?”

Flum closed her eyes, picturing Milkit running through the forest in her mind’s eye. She could feel her anxiety drain away, leaving behind only resolve. The subtle warmth of Milkit’s touch seemed to fill her palm. She knew what she had to do.

The source of Flum’s courage was rather simple: she wanted to protect the young girl she’d only just met this morning. If it weren’t for her, she may well have given up by now.

“All right, let’s get this done, little miss hero!”

Flum let out a final shout to urge herself on before plowing ahead in a mad dash toward the anzu. She could hear the sword bouncing off the occasional rock as she closed the gap. The anzu, also aware of the power differential between them, moved forward to meet her attack head on. It took a step...

There was still quite a bit of distance between them. Flum suppressed the fear welling up within her and kept going.

A second step...

It was practically on her now, but all she needed to do was avoid any attacks that would instantly kill her.

A third step...and contact.

The anzu brought its massive claws down toward Flum’s head. Flum ducked to her right, managing to save her skull from the crushing blow. The claws still caught her in the left shoulder and cut straight through her flesh like a hot knife through butter. Pieces of her shoulder flew everywhere, exposing the white bone underneath.

It felt like her whole arm was on fire. But it was still just heat—her brain hadn’t had time to recognize the sensation as pain. She didn’t slow her stride as she closed in on the anzu and swung her sword clear through its chest as she

ran past.



The black steel cut easily through the fur, fat, muscle, and even organs as it slid through the anzu's body.

"Nnng...gyaaaah!"

"Graooooooooor!!"

They both cried out in unison. There was, ultimately, little difference in their injuries...other than the fact that Flum's were quickly healing while the anzu's only grew worse.

Flum finally stopped her mad dash, though her sheer momentum made her slide a moment longer on the layer of leaves that blanketed the forest floor. She spun around and the two opponents squared off once again.

The anzu was clearly in pain as it began to beat its wings once more. It was likely about to unleash its wind attack again—the one that had chopped Flum into pieces before. Her body instinctively shuddered at the memory. Fortunately, her previous strike seemed to have shattered its focus, and it was taking much longer to gather enough wind this time. Once it did, however, there'd be nowhere for her to dodge at such close range.

Trying to stop the anzu from launching the spell meant getting in range of its claws or fangs, which would also likely be a fatal blow. Flum had only one real option available to her if she hoped to avoid a gruesome fate: get the anzu to run.

She wasn't too keen on the idea of letting something that'd put her through such misery get away, but it was pretty clear that the anzu had already used up much of its strength. One more push and it would probably give up and run.

Her mind raced for an idea until she spotted a stand of large trees just within striking distance. She didn't have time to think about whether it'd work or not. She had to act now.

Flum swung with all her might toward the nearest tree's trunk.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

THWUNK!

The dull sound of the sword's impact reverberated through the tree before, a

second later, the trunk shattered. Thick, ancient fibers of wood snapped one after another as the massive tree started to topple over.

Unfortunately, it wasn't falling toward the anzu—rather, it was coming right at her.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” Flum let out another scream and swung back at the rapidly falling trunk, this time with the flat edge of her sword.

Kawhoomp!

The blow knocked the tree back toward the anzu, which was just mere moments from unleashing its spell. The massive trunk landed on the lion-like creature's torso with a dull, wet thud. The anzu's legs instantly gave out as it was crushed between the ground and the tree.

It looked like it could probably drag itself free, given time. However, Flum had no intention of letting that happen.

She rushed forward with all she had and thrust her sword deep into the anzu's skull. “Come get some!!!”

“Gra...oooooor!” The blade effortlessly cleaved bone and slid deep into the anzu's brain, and yet, it still roared in pain. Clearly, this wasn't quite the deathblow she had been hoping for.

Flum pushed with all her might, until the sword was buried to the hilt. She then grabbed that hilt and pulled down as hard as she could, as if it were a lever.

“Nnnnnnnnggg...!”

“Go...rrr...”

As she carved through the anzu's brain, it finally lost consciousness. The massive beast went limp, like a puppet with its strings cut. Flum quickly let go of the sword to avoid getting pulled down with the collapsing creature as it swayed back and forth for a moment before finally tumbling over on one side, hitting the ground with a massive impact that sent up a flurry of leaves in its wake. The sword was still firmly embedded in its skull.

Flum looked at the corpse as she heaved in breaths of cool air.

“Think that was a tough enough challenge for my first time out, do you?”

The anzu lay there motionless. Only once she was sure it was finally dead did Flum let herself relax. She threw out her arms and dropped backward onto the soft ground.

Pwumpf. The cushion of leaves felt surprisingly good, if a bit damp and chilly. But even that felt nice against her flushed skin as her heartbeat struggled to return to normal. High up above, Flum caught a glimpse of the orange sky through the dense tree cover. It was getting late—she really needed to start heading back.

“Even the sky’s working against me here,” she grouched to herself.

Though the wounds on her body had long-since healed, she could still feel a stinging sensation, almost like a phantom pain. If anything, her clothes were in worse shape than she was. She’d lost her cloak somewhere, and her white shirt and shorts were nearly unrecognizable as clothing.

Flum felt a deep sense of uncertainty well up within her. “First I get screwed over by that stupid guild, then almost killed by a huge monster... What’s next?”

She really wasn’t excited about returning to the capital. However, the thought of Milkit waiting for her at the entrance to the forest finally inspired her to put that aside and let go of her worries for now. Feeling slightly more motivated, Flum propped up her upper body.

“I guess I can at least be proud that that jerk Dein didn’t get his way.” He’d undoubtedly be beside himself when he learned she’d survived not just an encounter with a werewolf but even a C-Rank monster like the anzu.

Flum slowly dragged herself to her feet, the whole while imagining the surprised expressions of the men when she got back to the guild.

Chapter 6:

A New Fate Awaits

NOW THAT THE BATTLE was over with, Flum suddenly found herself faced with a new problem. She'd been sent out here to retrieve a werewolf fang to get her license, but they were all in the anzu's stomach.

"I can't believe it managed to gobble them up like that. Gah!"

Flum gave the anzu's lifeless body an angry kick. There was no way she'd find another werewolf before the sun set, even if she started looking now. She wasn't confident that she could survive another monster encounter after nightfall.

There was only one option left.

"Guess I've gotta open him up..."

The anzu's hide was quite tough, with a thick layer of muscle underneath, but the Souleater easily sliced it open. As her sword sunk into its stomach, a foul stench immediately filled the clearing. Fortunately for Flum, it only took her a moment to find the still undigested werewolf bodies. Pulling the mutilated corpses free was still a pretty gruesome task, even for a girl who'd grown up on a farm.

She pinched her nose closed with one hand and turned her face away as far as she could before shoving her whole arm into the opening. Flum dry-heaved slightly as she felt the sickly warmth of the anzu's innards envelop her arm but forced it in until she could grab a werewolf's snout and yank hard.

As soon as her digestive-fluid-soaked arm reemerged, her senses were assaulted by a smell like she'd never encountered before.

"Eeeeeeeugh!!"

She rubbed her arm desperately against the ground, tree bark, bushes, and anything she could get close to, screaming the whole while, in an attempt to get the vile liquid off of her. Flum gave the anzu a kick for this final assault to her

senses from beyond the grave, before heaving a sigh and getting to work on retrieving the werewolf's fang. Sawing away at the creature's jaw was a pretty disgusting task but nothing compared to what she'd just done with the anzu's stomach.

Once she brought the fang back to the guild, she'd finally be granted her adventurer license...or so she hoped. Flum could easily imagine the receptionist lady finding a way to downplay her success and refuse her a license. She decided to bring back a piece of the anzu as well, for some insurance.

"I hate how little I know about this stuff. Gah! If I knew what bits of these things people wanted, I'd be set..."

Some parts of a monster's body were more valuable than others, but Flum's options were pretty limited at the moment, since she didn't even have a backpack to carry her spoils of war. If only she knew what was worth the most on the open market to speed up her money-making endeavors. Or if she had a magic bag that used the same parallel dimensional space that the Epic equipment did to store items—then she'd really be in business. Unfortunately, those were nearly impossible for anyone shy of an S-Rank adventurer to acquire.

"I guess we'll go with the fang, then."

Most monster fangs, including those of the werewolves, were generally used in all matters of crafting, including making weapons, equipment, and accessories. It took a few solid smacks with the Souleater, but she finally managed to snap the fang right out of the anzu's mouth. Flum picked it up and dusted it off. It was a lot heavier than it looked but not so much that she couldn't take it back to town.

She squeezed the werewolf fang in her other hand and turned back in the direction she'd come from. It was time to head back to Milkit.

Milkit sat dutifully on a tree stump just out the forest outskirts, her hands clasped in front of her chest and her face painted with worry. The sun was already easing its way toward the horizon and the sounds of insects chirping filled the air.

It'd been about three hours since they'd parted ways. If Flum had come out victorious, she should be back by now. Had she lost... Well, if she'd lost, she was already dead.

Milkit couldn't bear to think about it.

"I'll wait here until Master returns, no matter how long that may take."

The thought that she and Flum may never meet again pained her deeply. This was the first time she could remember ever being concerned about whether another person lived or died—even including her own masters. After all, to Milkit, a master was little more than a person who offered sustenance in exchange for controlling her.

That line of thought might have seemed bizarre, even sad, to someone who'd lived a normal life. But to Milkit, it was rather comforting. She thought of herself as little more than an emotionless doll. Human relationships were of little concern to her.

"But this...this one is different."

Milkit couldn't even fathom what life would be like in the days to come if Flum did actually survive and return to her. She would be allowed to smile, treated like a human... Her face might even be cured someday.

And with that joy would come a great sadness over all the years she'd lost and all the suffering she'd endured. Flum's warmth and kindness brought with them fear...the fear of losing what she'd just begun to experience. Milkit would be lying to herself if she claimed she'd never dreamed of a life without pain or misery. Over the years, she had given up on believing that such a place existed. But if she were to have found it, then...

"Haaah... Finally out! I'm tired...!"

A warm, familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

Milkit stood up and turned to look back at the forest. There was Flum, covered in even more blood than when she'd last seen her and holding a massive tooth or gauntlet of some sort.

"Master!" A faint smile graced her lips, though it quickly gave way to her

usual neutral expression. So, her prayers had been answered. She still didn't know what to do with her anxieties about the future, but she knew what she should do in the here and now.

Milkit hurried over to Flum, who greeted her with a charming grin. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Welcome back, Master." Milkit reached out to carry at least one of the items Flum was holding.

"You're gonna get bloody, y'know. Are you okay with that?"

"With a body like mine, being dirty hardly matters."

"Aww, don't talk about yourself like that, Milkit. Any slave of mine is going to need to be proud of themselves." Flum smirked as she handed the werewolf fang and gauntlet over to Milkit. The anzu fang was definitely beyond what the other girl could carry.

"I'm guessing that large fang there is from the anzu, but where did you get the gauntlet from?"

"Oh, that? I found it on the body of an adventurer near the entrance to the forest. He was nothing but bones now, so I doubt he'll miss it."

While Flum was feeling her way through the quickly darkening forest, her foot had caught on something hard and ungiving, sending her tumbling to the ground and the anzu's fang flying out of her arms.

"Aaaugh!"

You might think it odd for someone who had been chopped to shreds just a few hours ago to scream over a mere fall, but fear was fear, regardless of what caused it.

Looking more closely at the ground in front of her, Flum discovered the lower torso of a man—probably an adventurer who had ventured into the woods on the same mission she had, looking to hunt werewolves, only to encounter the anzu. The body was still dressed in armor and had a gauntlet tied around its arm.

The sight of the equipment reminded Flum of her former party. She'd tried to spend her time learning what she could from the other heroes, all of them legends in their own right. Amazingly, it had seemed to work, and she'd bonded with some of them—though perhaps they'd just been taking pity on her all along.

One of the people she'd bonded with was Gadhio Lathcutt, the so-called “star killer.” He was a quiet, serious man outfitted in hulking black armor, with the terrifying face to match, but there was something about him that made you want to get to know him better. Despite her lack of skill, he'd taught her several techniques with a sword and talked about his days as an adventurer.

“You'll find a lotta bodies on the field of battle, and quite a few of them will be outfitted with some of the best gear around. All but the most pious of people would happily take the equipment from the remains of their fellow men.”

“Right from their bodies?”

“They're dead, aren't they? There's no sense in letting good equipment go to waste with them.”

“But isn't that...bad luck or something? Just thinking about it gives me the chills.”

“You'll never get ahead thinking like that, Flum.”

“R-right! I guess an adventurer needs to be a realist...”

“Nah, you're not wrong, kid. Don't be so quick to change your mind. Like you said, the spirits of the dead sometimes do hang around and refuse to let go of their equipment.”

“Really??”

“Cursed equipment, they're called. They have all sorts of different effects, from lowering your stats to sticking with you wherever you go. There are even some extreme cases where just equipping them can kill you. That's why you should always use Scan to check if equipment's cursed.”

“B-but...I can't use Scan.”

“Heh, really? Well then, you better find a friend to stick by your side. An adventurer should never travel alone, anyway. You need someone by your side to help push you forward or even pull you back at just the right time.”

This was the first lecture Gadhio had ever offered her.

She’d probably dwelled on the memory longer than she needed to, but it did bring to mind the important lesson that equipment pilfered from corpses sometimes carried a curse with it. Flum decided to use Scan to check out the gauntlet she’d stumbled across.

Name: Bloodied Steel Gauntlet

Tier: Rare

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Strength by 82]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Magic by 101]

It was nowhere near as powerful as the Epic-tier sword, but it still had the pretty impressive curse of reducing your stats by a total of 183 points. Flum brought her hands together in a quick apology to the dead man and took the gauntlet for herself. If what Gadhio said was true, then hopefully the man would be happy to see his equipment put to good use.

“...And that’s where I got this,” Flum finished as Milkit eyed the gauntlet suspiciously.

“So it’s cursed?”

“The enchantment didn’t seem to have any effect until I put my arm through it, so it should be okay for you to carry it. I don’t mind carrying it myself if it bothers you, though.”

“No, you’re already carrying that heavy fang. And besides, you need not worry yourself about a mere slave, Master.”

“You really take this whole slave thing seriously, don’t you? Ah well, if you’re

okay with it, fine by me.”

And with that, they finally left the forest and made their way back to the capital.

Night in the capital was a completely different beast from what it was like during the daylight hours. Magical lamps illuminated the figures of scantily dressed women who filled the streets outside the multitude of boisterous drinking establishments. Several men, hoping to find their next mark to escort to an overpriced bar, made their way over toward the two girls, though they quickly sneered and turned away once they caught sight of the mark on Flum’s cheek.

“I hope the guild’s still open...” As far as Flum could recall, there hadn’t been any opening hours written on the sign out front. “Considering it was little more than a bar with a reception desk, I don’t think we’re entirely out of luck. Besides, I really don’t want to spend the whole night hanging on to this giant fang.”

When they finally arrived at their destination, the two could hear the excited banter of drunken adventurers even from where they stood in the street. Apparently, their worries had been unfounded.

No sooner had Flum shouldered her way through the doorway than she could feel several pairs of eyes immediately lock on to her. They didn’t look any friendlier than last time, though their conversation grew a lot more animated. From the looks of it, they’d been laying bets on whether she and Milkit would make it back alive.

“Yeeeeeah!” One man cheered and threw a fist into the air, while several others at the table tossed some coins his way.

Y’lla’s eyes went wide as Flum dropped the anzu’s fang on the floor with a heavy thud, and Milkit set the werewolf fang onto the counter.

“I believe this is what I was sent out for,” Flum said.

Y’lla ran her finger across the fang before turning her attention back to Flum. She was glaring.

“So I passed the test, right?”

“Did...did you really kill one?”

“Of course. You didn’t think a little ol’ werewolf could stop me, did you?”

“You little...”

“What’s the problem?”

“This doesn’t count! I’m not about to let a dirty little slave like you become an adventurer!!”

Y’lla was near hysterical as she grabbed the fang and threw it in Flum’s direction. Much to her dismay, Flum caught it easily in midair, adding further fuel to the receptionist’s rage.

Flum pointed the fang back at Y’lla.

“When an adventurer completes a job, you need to pay them. That’s what a guild does, isn’t it?”

“Grrr.”

“And I want to sell this while I’m here.”

Flum hefted the anzu fang and unceremoniously set it down in front of the woman. The reception desk creaked in protest under the heavy load.

“What’s that?”

“The fang of an anzu, a C-Rank monster. I happened across one while we were looking for a werewolf, so I figured I’d bring part of it back with me.”

Guilds also served as a trading post of sorts, buying up valuable materials even when there weren’t any requests for them. Though selling the items directly would net the adventurer a larger profit, this option saved them the time of finding a buyer.

“C... Did you say C-Rank?” This girl who should have met her end at the hands of a werewolf had somehow managed to defeat an even more powerful monster while she was at it. It was clear that Y’lla was having a hard time processing the situation and was at a complete loss for words.

Picking up on the lull in the conversation, two rough-looking men walked over

from the bar. The first of them sneered in a wicked approximation of a smile.

“Now, now, lil’ lady. There’s no need to lie. You tryin’ to say that a pair of slaves like yourselves managed to take down a mammoth beast like an anzu? It takes a whole party of us to face off against one of those things, y’know. When I cast Scan on ya a second ago, your stats weren’t much to speak of, and your equipment wasn’t much better. If you’re gonna lie, you should really come up with a better story.”

The second man spoke up as well. “Oy, and ya smell pretty awful at that. Been passed around by a couple men there, girly? Might want to start washing their juices off when they’re finished with ya. But hey, I get it, you used that money to buy this fang, didn’t ya? Or maybe you just took it instead of payment from some adventurer desperate for a warm hole. If that’s the case, I think I’ve got a better job for ya than being an adventurer...”

His hand was buried deep in his pocket as he leaned his unshaven face closer and closer to her. The more Flum listened to him talk, the angrier and angrier she got, until she finally reached her tipping point and launched her fist straight at him.

“Flum punch!!”

She landed a blow right in the middle of the man’s face, smashing his nose and sending him flat onto his back, blood pouring out over his face.

“Why you little runt...!”

“And what’s your rank, old man?!”

“Huh? I, well, uh, we’re both D-Rank!”

“Huh? Is that all it takes to become a D-Rank adventurer? I mean, he toppled like a stack of bricks from a single punch from a little girl like me, with no stats to speak of.”

“I’m gonna make you eat those words!” The man drew the sword from his waist and lunged in to strike.

After letting him close the distance, Flum summoned forth Souleater. *Swish!* The blade cut a graceful arc through the air and stopped a hair’s breadth in

front of the man's throat, the tip pressing hard against his flesh.

The thug dared not take another step closer, though his whole body shook uncontrollably. All Flum would have to do was apply even the slightest pressure to take his life.

"An...an Epic weapon...!"

"It's been cursed, though."

She let the sword disappear. As soon as the blade was gone, the man crumpled to his knees. Flum turned her attention back to Y'lla with a triumphant grin on her face. "Is that enough to convince you that I'm not lying?"

Y'lla looked upset about the whole situation, but she decided to not press the situation any further. She accepted the werewolf fang as proof of job completion and begrudgingly handed Flum some money, along with her newly minted adventurer license.

Flum held the card up above her head and beamed as she inspected it closely. "F-Rank Adventurer," it said across the top, along with her name.

Y'lla filled out the forms to purchase the anzu fang and handed an even larger sum of money to Flum. They could live off this for quite a few days and still have some to spare. With that out of the way, their business here was done. Flum gave a cheerful wave to Y'lla before leaving the guild with Milkit.

Once they were outside, she let out a sigh and felt her whole body go limp with exhaustion.

"Haaaah, I can't believe how nervous I was back there."

She'd managed to keep her calm through the ordeal, but she felt all of the stress and anxiety catch up with her the moment she let down her guard. The brave newbie adventurer who'd stared down two seasoned veterans moments ago was now a bundle of nerves.

"Well done, Master." Milkit, seeming to pick up on how hard that had been for Flum, offered some words of encouragement.

Flum grabbed the younger girl's hand in her own. "Well, I'm exhausted."

Milkit squeezed her hand back. The gesture was now completely natural for them.

“I expected some resistance from that Y’lla lady, but I never imagined other people would get involved. I’m not sure if I should be thankful or annoyed that creep Dein wasn’t around.”

“Well, we’ve got enough money to rent a room. I think we can consider that a victory, no?”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Let’s find a place to sleep for the night, and then I’m going to take a nice, long bath. And tomorrow, we’re getting new clothes.”

“You could certainly use some nicer clothes, Master.”

Flum looked down at herself and laughed dryly. Milkit’s stained clothes were pretty bad but paled in comparison to just how bad her own clothing looked. She wanted nothing more than to get out of these rags.

“I gotta agree, to be honest. Of course, I’m getting you some new clothes too, Milkit.”

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself. I’m just a slave, Master.”

“Well then, as your master, let me make that an order. Tomorrow, we’re going to buy you new clothes.”

Milkit looked down at the ground, unsure how to respond to this. “But I...”

It was evident that she didn’t think that someone with a scarred and bandaged face like hers would look any better, no matter what clothing she wore.

Flum patted Milkit’s head affectionately. “Don’t you worry, Milkit. Just relax and let’s have a little fun, huh?”

Milkit’s heart fluttered at the relaxed smile on Flum’s face. It was a feeling she was altogether unfamiliar with. But if that was the road she would be travelling with this girl who’d chosen to take her on as a slave, then...

“Yes, let’s.”

She nodded firmly. She’d made her decision. This was her chance to reinvent

herself as a new person. To rid herself of the girl who had lost everything and held nothing to her name.

The two girls, whom even the gods had turned their backs on mere hours ago, walked hand in hand toward their bright new future.



**Masked Slave,
the One Whose Reign
Shall Never End**

Intermission 2:

The Teachings of Destruction

“MORE... I NEED MORE...!” High in the sky, the blue-skinned man’s red mane seemed to defy gravity as it stood on end. He threw his hands up into the air and shook. “Heat, I need more heat! What the hell’s wrong with you all? I’m giving it my best, and it’s still way too chilly here!”

His voice boomed so loudly that Cyrill could feel it in her bones. She responded to his frantic yelling with a blast of heat of her own.

“Prometheus—Illegal Formula!!”

She summoned her magic, accumulating it in her fist, before letting it fly free. A number of fireballs shot from the ground directly beneath her airborne target and soared ten meters or so into the air, lighting up the night and giving their surroundings the look of a disturbing hellscape.

The more power a mage put into the Illegal Formula spell, the stronger its effect. Combining it with Prometheus could extend its effect tenfold. This made it nearly impossible to actually maintain any sort of control over the resulting magic, but fortunately, the area was completely empty except for Tsyon, the will-o’-the-wisp. The demons living nearby must have learned that the heroes were coming and left in advance of their arrival.

Jean lashed out in annoyance at Eterna, who was busy erecting a shield around the area with Maria. “Eterna, put the blaze out!”

“I know what I’m doing, Jean,” she replied coolly. She’d been working on it before Jean even opened his mouth.

Magical energy formed around her body as she concentrated on her assist spell. Two orbs appeared just above her shoulders, light sparking off of them like tiny fireworks.

“Water Meteorite!”

A massive ball of water appeared above Tsyon’s head before, moments later,

giving away to gravity and nearly dragging him down to the ground with it. Eterna's plan seemed to be to kill two birds with one stone: attack the enemy and put out the flames cloaking him while she was at it.

"Gotta try harder than that!"

Rather than make any attempt to avoid the attack, Tsyon sent his flame-covered body shooting up and through the water. He kicked the magical ball of water, sending it flying back toward the party.

Jean, Maria, and Eterna watched in shock. "It's nothing more than a toy to him!"

"He's a lot stronger than we expected."

"Unexpected, indeed."

Whether their shield would even be able to take the blow remained to be seen. Gadhio dove in front of the party and rammed his feet deep into the ground, leaving small craters in his wake with the weight of his massive armor and inhumanly large blade. It made for a pretty impressive sight. Despite all the weight he bore on his body, however, Gadhio still moved with impressive speed.

What was more, he could cast magic. His voice rang out under his helmet as barely more than a whisper. "Earth Glaive."

Stone pillars erupted out of the ground in front of him with each step he took forward, forming a staircase that took Gadhio higher and higher into the air. As he climbed the magical stairs, he whipped his absurdly large blade off his back. The incoming ball of magic was still out of reach when he finally stopped and held his sword at the ready. Gadhio let out a slow breath and refocused his brute strength into other parts of his body.

This technique was known as "prana," and utilized a different type of energy than normal magic. It allowed him to give up some of his physical strength for a short time and reallocate it into his other stats.

Gadhio felt the energy flow through his arms and into the tip of his sword.

"Raaaaaaaaauh!!"

He swung the heavy sword so hard and fast that it unleashed an invisible sonic wave.

Prana Shaker was one of the so-called Cavalier Arts, a special type of swordplay studied by many knights throughout the kingdom. Though this was a relatively low-level skill, its effect depended upon the power of its user, and in Gadhio's capable hands, it was more than enough to put a stop to the incoming attack. The sonic wave slashed the water meteorite in two before continuing straight on its course, even managing to break Tsyon's skin upon impact.

"Heh, you're next!"

Tsyon waved his hand through the air, leaving behind a black cloud of smoke as he transitioned from using fire to dark magic. His title, "will-o'-the-wisp" came from his rare affinity, which granted him the ability to control both fire and dark magic.

The expanding cloud of smoke allowed him to spot the Prana Shaker shock waves as they cut through the air. He reached out and grabbed one with his bare hand with a loud crack. The thin coat of flame running across his body grew slightly brighter.

"Heat, I still need more heat!"

He slapped his hands together, destroying the energy of Gadhio's attack before letting out another powerful roar and clapping his knees. Despite his attack being so thoroughly defeated, Gadhio wasn't done yet. He took another powerful step forward, a pillar of stone shooting out of the ground to meet his next footfall. He was now within striking distance of Tsyon.

Gadhio's massive blade met Tsyon's flaming fists with a bone-jarring crash, causing the very air around them to shudder in response.

"Nngraaaw!"

"I think it's about time we put an end to this!"

Tsyon slammed straight into Gadhio, sending the armored man flying back earthward. Meanwhile, the two halves of the severed water sphere also crashed into the ground and put out the sea of fire, surrounding the battlefield in a thick white cloud of steam.

“You’re a hero, aren’t you? Get up off the ground and face me like a man! You’re the only ones who can really get us Demon Chiefs going!”

There was some truth to his challenge—as long as the heroes continued to fight them, the Demon Chiefs could have all the combat their hearts desired. But Cyrill had had a harder and harder time putting her heart into battle, and using her magic to its fullest extent, since Flum had left.

“And now, it’s your turn.” Tsyon turned to unleash his fury upon Cyrill when an arrow came shooting at him from far off in the distance. Sensing that his target’s attention was fully focused on Cyrill, Linus had let off a single, well-timed shot.

“Got ’em.”

The arrow maintained its speed and stayed true to its course despite the vast distance, closing in fast on Tsyon’s forehead. The clouds of steam obscured its movement until right before it struck its mark.

FWIP!

The arrow sliced through the air, leaving a trail of white behind it. Tsyon finally took notice of the foreign object when it was mere inches from striking in the middle of his brow.

“Hya!” He moved instinctively, swiping the arrow right out of the air. “Not so fast, I’m not going down that easy, you little runt!”

The arrow caught fire immediately and began to burn in his grip until it was little more than ash. Tsyon enjoyed the excitement of battle, so an underhanded, sneaky attack like this felt like a personal insult to him. His sense of indignation rose as he raised his arms high up into the air and prepared his most powerful spell yet.

The fireball he summoned forth made Eterna’s Water Meteorite look like a mere plaything.

“Fine! If you aren’t going to give me what I need, I’ll show you what real heat feels like! Flare Meteorite!!”

It was the same spell Eterna had cast previously, though with a different

affinity. That meant there was only one explanation as for why it was so much bigger and more powerful:

“Illegal Formula!”

He, too, was using the Illegal Formula in a bid to kill Cyrill and the rest of the party in one fell swoop.

The fireball loomed larger and larger as it bore down on the heroes, giving off the impression that the sun itself had come down to earth, burning away the residual steam in the process.

“If that hits us, we’re doomed.”

“We’re done for.”

“How are you okay with this, Eterna? Can’t you use your powerful water magic to do something to protect us?!”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?”

“Well, if the boot fits...!”

Maria could take Eterna and Jean’s sniping no longer and shouted at the two of them, uncharacteristic as it was of her to lose her temper like this. “This is no time to bicker, you two! We need to reinforce our defenses. Gadhio, get back over here! If we can all crowd in close together, the combined Shield effect just might save us.”

“There’s no way that’ll be enough! We need Cyrill to cast Brave before using the Shield spell!”

“Well, that’s not an option right now. That’s why we’re trying this!”

“Nngh...gah! Why the hell can’t Cyrill use Brave right now? That’s the strongest asset a hero has available! Dammit Cyrill, can’t you do something? You’re a hero, aren’t you?! This isn’t the time to let your feelings get you down! Just do it!”

Cyrill averted her gaze and grit her teeth. He was right: she was a pretty sad excuse for a hero right now. But at her core, she wasn’t just a “hero,” she was still a young woman, and one with many conflicting emotions. It wasn’t like she

could just erase the pain in her heart and her feelings of regret at a moment's notice.

"What good will it do you to fixate on Flum, that piece of trash?!" Jean raged on. "You are one of the chosen! There's no reason for you to worry yourself over that slavish idiot. What you need to do now is to do your duty to protect the great ones, the chosen ones!"

"I... But I..."

"If you're a hero, then start acting like one and stop fixating on these what ifs and your pathetic emotions!"

"This is hardly the time for this, Jean! We need to prepare ourselves!"

"Dammit! Why, why won't you understand?! Everything I speak is the truth!"

Jean was so fixated on just how right he was that he was utterly oblivious to the effect his words were having on Cyrill. He, Eterna, and Maria formed up around the party and began to cast Shield. Up above them, the Flare Meteorite continued to grow as Tsyon put even more of his magic into it.

"It's a shame, I really thought you would have made for a more energizing battle."

The fireball was already more than big enough to incinerate the entire party. All Tsyon had to do was release it, and they'd be done for. But at the last possible moment, another figure appeared behind Tsyon and slapped him hard in the back of the head.

"What's all this talk about getting energized? This is war, you idiot!"

"Wha??" Tsyon tumbled forward in the air and furrowed his brow in annoyance. Behind him was a blue-skinned woman decked out in a costume that left little to the imagination. She shook her mane of dark blue hair in annoyance and glared at Tsyon.

"Gah! Can't you just leave me alone, Neigass?" Tsyon demanded. Neigass was a hematophage and also one of the Demon Chiefs like Tsyon.

"Leave you alone and let you kill them? Did anything the Demon Lord said get through your thick skull?"

“...Refresh my memory.”

“Don’t! Kill! The! Humans! He was pretty clear about that! Did you forget already??”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, that completely slipped my mind.”

The ball of fire quickly dissipated as Tsyon let the spell drop. The heroes looked up at the two Demon Chiefs talking among themselves, feeling their blood run cold in terror.

Tsyon seemed abruptly bored with them. “Looks like we’re gonna have to cut the fight short here, okay? But next time, I want you to try a little harder!”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, he flew off. Cyrill and the rest of the party could only watch in confusion as their enemy backed down just as they’d been moments from annihilation, unable to understand what was happening.

Neigass looked back down at the party, taking note of the sheer hatred in Maria’s eyes. “I’d love to try and talk you guys out of what you’re doing, but somehow, I don’t think that’d work. Anyway, see ya next time, destroyers of peace!”

With a nonchalant shrug and a wink, she flew off after Tsyon, leaving behind a very confused party of heroes and a holy woman of the cloth who glared after the shrinking figures with unrestrained hatred.

The battle now over, Linus regrouped with the party to check on the damage they’d taken. Fortunately, Maria’s magic was more than enough to cure all of their injuries, though their supplies were another story entirely. They’d all been incinerated in the firestorm, and making any further progress without them would be quite a challenge.

“I mean, we don’t want to use a teleportation stone here, but damn... What a waste this whole battle was!”

“We were making pretty good time, I’d say, so why are we still behind schedule?? I even got rid of all our dead weight!”

Maria looked over from where she was treating Gadhio’s wounds to chastise

Jean. "Just calm down, will you, Jean?"

The incensed sage didn't seem interested in listening. "Calm down? You expect me to calm down?? And what about you, Cyrill? Just what in the hell has gotten into you, huh? Huh??"

"...I'm sorry."

"Oh, you're sorry? And what good does that do me?!"

Linus put a hand on Jean's shoulder. "Cool it, Jean!"

Jean yanked away.

"Damn, damn, damn it all! Can't you all see how right I am? I can't believe I'm surrounded by such complete imbeciles!"

With that, Jean stormed off across the scorched landscape away from the party.

"He just can't let go..." Linus knew that Jean fancied Cyrill, which made the whole situation all the more complicated. Jean was probably jealous of Flum, in his own way. He'd figured that getting rid of her would leave an opening in Cyrill's heart, and yet all it did was make things worse. What's more, Flum wasn't even around for him to vent his anger on. With nowhere for his emotions to go, he was probably having a rough time of it, and there was nothing that Linus could do for him as a friend.

"All right, I think you're good."

"Thanks, Maria."

"No worries, this is my job."

The healing done, Gadhio pulled himself back up to his feet and rotated his arm a few times to check his shoulder. It still stung a bit, but most of the damage dealt by Tsyon's blow was undone.

Eterna had been watching the healing closely from a distance, but as soon as Gadhio got up, she began to walk away from the party, though in a different direction from Jean. This wasn't exactly unusual for her, so no one paid much attention except for Gadhio, her closest friend and confidant. He felt as if she were asking him to follow.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

Gadhio left Cyrill, Linus, and Maria behind to hurry after Eterna. An uncomfortable silence fell over the three remaining party members. Cyrill knew all too well that she was the source of the dark mood that hung over them.

Linus tried to break the tension. “Don’t worry too much about it, huh? It can happen to anyone, hero or otherwise.”

“That’s right. We’ve got a ways to go before we reach the Demon Lord. I’m sure you’ll be back to your old self by then.”

Her friends’ attempts to make her feel better only made Cyrill feel worse. “Yeah...thanks.”

Maria and Linus exchanged worried looks. Maybe it was best to just change the subject.

“What the hell was that all about, anyway? He had us right where he wanted, and then...nothing. And then there was all that talk about orders and not killing humans...”

Though Linus had been quite some distance away from the two Demon Chiefs, he’d gotten the gist of their conversation by reading their lips. He had hoped that turning the subject back to something mission-related would bring the two back into the conversation, but it only seemed to annoy Maria, who started clacking her fingernails together.

“That is strange, I suppose. They’d been pretty ruthless about murdering anyone and everyone they could so far.”

“Gah, who cares? They’re plotting something, I just know it.”

“Agreed. We’ll all be better off once the demons have been wiped off the planet, once and for all.”

Maria made no effort to conceal the hatred in her voice. She may not be sure what they were up to, but she knew what needed to be done. Of all of the party members, she bore the greatest sense of animosity toward their enemy, and Linus knew why.

The last time they were back in the capital, he’d made use of his information-

gathering skills to do a little research on Maria. Sure, he felt a little guilty about it, but there was something about her that had piqued his interest.

Maria Affenjenz, age 17, was a world-renowned mage who had dedicated her life to being a member of the clergy and serving Origin. However, this was not always the case. When she was a child, she had grown up in an outlying village was raised as a follower of a folk religion. According to what Linus heard, she still had a tattoo on her back marking her childhood faith in that god.

Around ten years ago, when Maria was just seven years old, her village was attacked by demons and completely wiped out. Her family, her friends, and everyone she knew...just gone. Maria was taken in by the church, which was when she converted to being a follower of Origin. As she grew older, she learned that she carried a light affinity and later became a nun before being called upon by Origin to serve in the party that would take down the Demon Lord.

She certainly had more than enough reason to hate the demons. However, as Linus continued to watch her, he sensed something else deep beneath the surface.

Maria cocked her head to the side and looked inquisitively at Linus. “What is it?”

She really was beautiful. So beautiful that he wanted to dismiss the idea that darkness might lurk in her heart. But even if there were, that was okay with him. Someday, somehow, he hoped that he could support her. Maybe, just maybe, then she’d open up to him.

“Ah, uh, it’s nothing.”

Alas, it still wasn’t time for him to put himself on the line like that. He wasn’t ready.

Annoyed by his own uncertainty, Linus turned his attention back to Cyrill and tried complimenting her on their recent fight, but there was no change in her forlorn expression. Until she had a chance to reunite with Flum and apologize to her, it seemed unlikely that Cyrill would be able to pull herself out of this slump.

Eterna walked for about five minutes before finally coming to a stop. Upon turning around, she found Gadhio standing dutifully behind her. She ran her finger along a fish-shaped item—an accessory that boosted her magical ability—that hung at her side as she spoke to her companion.

“Why did you follow me?”

“You called me.”

“Oh? I suppose I did, then...”

She’d forgotten about it or was joking. Gadhio always had a hard time reading her.

“Well, since we’re here, I might as well ask you something. What do you think of our party, Gadhio?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Is it a good fit for you? Are you bored?”

This wasn’t the first time Gadhio had gotten the impression that Eterna wasn’t particularly interested in the idea of slaying the Demon Lord. Prior to this journey, she had lived a relatively simple life in the mountains, responsible to no one but herself. She hadn’t even known that she had the strength of an S-Rank adventurer. She didn’t look much different from Flum, though she never spoke of her age or motivations, leaving many questions about her unanswered.

“Honestly, I’d expected this whole Demon-Lord slaying thing to be a lot more exhilarating.”

“Aaah, I see. It does tend to fall short there.”

“I only noticed how much Flum added to the journey when she was gone. There’s nothing fun about what we’re doing now. The food’s awful, and it seems like we’re always arguing.”

“That...is certainly true.”

Even Gadhio had picked up on the dark cloud that hung over the party. Much of it was Jean’s fault, but Cyrill’s despondent mood and Maria’s highly calculated actions had turned every conversation into a figurative minefield.

Who could have imagined that without Flum, the whole party would break down like this? Even he had simply taken for granted the heavy burdens she'd carried.

"I've decided to leave the party."

"What??"

"I mean, if Flum could leave, why can't I? I guess it doesn't really matter, though. Even if they tell me not to, I'm still doing it."

Jean had clearly overlooked this possibility. They had believed that they were the chosen few, that it was their solemn duty to defeat the Demon Lord and that quitting wasn't an option. But now that Flum had left—or rather, been kicked out of—the party, that left the door open for the rest of them, as well.

"According to Jean, I'm of little use to the party anyway, and I'll just hold you guys back."

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind."

"Of course I have! That little jerk's magic ability is a mere 8,800 compared to my 10,000. Any self-respecting mage would be annoyed to have someone so much weaker constantly belittling you."

"So there's nothing I can do to stop you."

"Honestly, with how by the book you are, I kind of expected you to try."

"This isn't really about rules."

"Are you sad?"

"Losing my protégé Flum didn't bother me, so having a brat like you leave isn't much of a loss."

"We really are quite alike, then." Eterna chuckled to herself, slowly bringing a smile to Gadhio's face as well.

Once the party finally reassembled, Cyrill cast the Return spell to bring them back to the capital, after which Eterna declared that she would be leaving the party. Jean lashed out angrily, and Cyrill was taken completely by surprise, but

this did little to change her mind.

“See ya!”

Eterna waved casually over her shoulder as she left the teleportation room behind. That was the last time they would ever see her again.

Chapter 7:

From the Depths of Hell to a Life of Normalcy

EVEN FLUSH WITH MONEY from the guild, Flum and Milkit were having a hard time securing a place to stay due to the obvious mark on Flum's cheek and the bandages wrapped around Milkit's head. They kept being turned away before they even set foot inside the building. They pushed on, however, and finally found a run-down inn in one of the dark shanty towns in the West District.

The entrance opened onto a restaurant with a bored-looking man standing at the counter, his unshaven chin resting on his fist while he let out a yawn. His eyes lit up upon seeing the two girls enter.

"Well, hey, look at that! Are you two customers, by chance??"

He must have noticed that they were slaves, though the look of excitement on his face made it clear that he didn't particularly care. The man stepped out from behind the counter and spread his arms wide, his best approximation of a salesman's grin coming to his face.

"Welcome, welcome to our humble inn! And I was starting to get lonely here all by myself!"

Flum was taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor. "Umm...hi..."

"May I ask what brings you here? Hungry? Looking for a place to stay? A little bit of both??"

"B-both, I suppose. You do know we're slaves, right? Is that okay?"

"Pshaw! Money's money, right? Besides, I'll probably be shutting down in a few days, anyway. Gyahaha!"

"I'm sure that's not the case..." But taking a look around the place, Flum wasn't so sure. It really was completely empty. She started to realize that the man wasn't merely being polite—he really was just happy to have customers, slaves or otherwise. Perhaps he'd even let them stay for free.

"Alas, I don't think we'll be having any more customers any time soon. You

two might be my last guests!”

“Why haven’t you had any customers?”

“Well, I came from this small podunk town called Anichidey in the hopes of following my dream, but unfortunately, it didn’t quite work out as planned. Guess I didn’t have quite the eye for business, huh?” The man grimaced slightly but still managed to force out a laugh.

It probably had little to do with his business sense and more to do with location, Flum figured. The shanty towns of the West District made the rest of the District look well mannered in comparison. Very few people would ever put their life at risk by staying here, no matter how cheap it was.

The good news was that the innkeeper seemed to be a genuinely good person.

“Do ya mind if I ask your names?”

“I’m Flum, and this here is...”

“...Milkit.”

“Flum and Milkit, huh? I’m Stude. For what it’s worth, I’ll do my best to make sure you have a great time here at my humble inn, even if it won’t be for long.”

With that, Stude offered his hand. After a moment’s hesitation, Flum shook it.

Stude wasn’t lying when he said that he’d do everything he could for them. He only charged them for one person despite giving them a double room and also whipped up a pretty impressive feast for dinner. It was a hell of a deal for the price, though Flum felt a little bit guilty at just how far he was going for them.

The next morning, the two were met with a full-course meal consisting of bread, soup, salad, eggs, meat, and fish. The table was absolutely covered with food—way too much for so early in the morning. Flum managed to get it all down, though Milkit, who apparently wasn’t much of a big eater, couldn’t finish her share. Stude didn’t appear offended but waved it off with a smile, telling them he was just clearing out his supplies.

Once Stude was out of sight, Flum grimaced to herself and whispered to Milkit. "I just hope he takes care of himself, too..."

After breakfast, the two got ready and left for the Central District in search of some place to buy new clothes. Flum's clothes were little more than rags now after the battle with the anzu, and she didn't relish the thought of walking out in the open along the main thoroughfare. They decided to just leave in the baggy white pajamas they'd been provided in the hotel room. They were warm and didn't look all that bad, if still hardly fit for walking around town.

First off, they made their way to a relatively cheap clothing store to find something for Flum. They finally settled upon a store along the main street, just a short way away from the south gate leading to the castle.

Flum hummed cheerfully to herself as she looked at the various pants hung neatly on their hangers. A woman sliding past her scowled slightly as she caught sight of the mark of a slave on her cheek, though Flum didn't seem to notice.

Finally, her gaze settled on a knee-length checkered skirt. Flum stood in front of the mirror and held it up to her waist before turning to Milkit.

"What do you think?"

Milkit looked confused, as if wondering why anyone would want her opinion, but ultimately went for the safe answer. "It suits you quite well, Master."

However, it was clear from her eyes that she had some doubts on the wisdom of an up-and-coming adventurer wearing a skirt, worrying that it might limit her movement.

"Hmm, you don't seem convinced."

"No, of course not, Master."

"If you have any reservations, I really want to hear them, Milkit. It'll help me a lot."

Milkit hesitated for a moment. "...Are you sure that you want me to speak my mind?"

Answering truthfully could mean a lashing for a slave, no matter how gently she tried to convey her opinions. Just the thought made Milkit's throat seize up,

as if to keep her from speaking any further.

But Flum wasn't like her previous master.

"Of course! I wouldn't have asked your opinion if I didn't want to hear it. So let loose, Milkit."

Milkit gathered her courage. "In that case..."

"Yes? Go on..."

"Considering that you'll be fighting monsters, I think... I think that pants would be easier to move around in and better suited for the job."

Flum brought her fist down into her hand and nodded, convinced. She hung the skirt back up.

"Y'know, you're probably right. Thanks, Milkit. I didn't even think about how it'd affect my movement in battle."

Milkit brought her hands to her chest at the sudden praise. It was all she could do to remain standing.

Flum moved on to another section of the store and pulled a pair of short pants off the rack. Once again, she held them up to her waist and turned to Milkit. "How about these?"

Milkit answered easily this time. "They suit you quite well, Master, and should be easy to move around in."

Flum grinned at this, satisfied with herself. "All right then, that's one problem solved."

She picked a simple shirt to match, made her purchase, and went into the dressing room to change. The new, casual outfit showed off her well-tanned skin, a souvenir from her journey. She felt a lot more comfortable walking around town now, the looks passersby gave her now far less judgmental than they'd been just moments ago.

"Welp, that's it for me. Now it's your turn, Milkit."

"I'm fine like this, really."

"You can't keep walking around like that, not if you'll be coming with me,

Milkit. Isn't there anything you want to wear? Thanks to Stude's kindness, we have a lot more money than I expected. Whatever you want, it's yours." They couldn't afford an expensive ballgown, of course, but Flum felt fairly certain Milkit wouldn't ask for anything of the sort.

After thinking it over for a bit, Milkit finally responded. "I...I think I like what I'm wearing now."

"Noooo. Not gonna happen."

They went back and forth like this a few more times before Milkit finally gave in and told Flum what she wanted to wear. After a bit of searching, the two entered a high-end shop.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Flum asked.

Milkit stepped out of the dressing room, wearing a black and white maid outfit.

"I should ask the same of you, Master. Are you sure it's okay to spend this kind of money on me?"

"Don't worry about the price, Milkit. We've got more than enough money right now. But is that really what you want to wear?"

The skirt and chest of Milkit's dress were done up with frilly lace. Honestly, the outfit looked distinctly unsuited to a servant's duties, but it was probably meant more for the...unique proclivities of a master, rather than for practical household work. Milkit's face bandages somehow complemented the overall gothic look of the dress, though, so Flum figured it all came together pretty decently.



Milkit played with the edge of her skirt as she looked at herself in the mirror. “I often saw dresses like this back at my old master’s and always hoped for a chance to wear one myself.”

“Well, it certainly looks cute on you. Want to get it?”

“The design really is pretty. Too pretty for someone like me...”

“No, not at all! It’s not just the clothes but the whole look. You look cute in it, Milkit. Excuse me, shopkeeper!”

Flum blushed slightly as she encouraged her friend, though Milkit only stared back blankly. She waved over a staff member, who quickly came hurrying over to their side. Once she caught sight of the mark on Flum’s cheek, however, a look of disgust flashed across her face before she managed to muster up a look of professionalism.

Flum and Milkit paid and left the shop. The two made for an interesting pair: a slave dressed in casual street wear with a bloodied gauntlet hanging from her waist, accompanied by a maid whose face was covered in bandages. She’d taken them clothes shopping to avoid drawing unwanted attention, but Flum was starting to wonder if this had the opposite effect.

Fortunately, the Central District was absolutely teeming with people ranging from local shoppers to travelers from far-off lands, all of whom were busy with their own errands and paid little attention to Flum and Milkit. It felt almost like a festival was underway, but this was just another day here in the capital. There were enough people just walking in the streets to fill Flum’s little village several times over. If they stopped paying attention to where they put their feet for just a moment, they risked getting swept up into the unending stream of pedestrians.

Flum took Milkit’s hand and pulled her through the crowd to make sure they stayed together.

There was still a lot they needed to purchase. Everything they needed to start their new life together—or at least, everything that they could carry. For now, Flum figured it best to keep their purchases to the absolute essentials: shoes, underwear, toothbrushes, and bathing products. She also wanted a bag for

when they went out on jobs. A lantern and knife would also come in handy.

Money might not be a problem at the moment, but their time was still a limited commodity. The two moved as fast as they could without tiring Milkit out, hitting up as many shops as possible on their shopping spree. It was a pretty busy day but also an unexpectedly valuable experience for Milkit, who'd never had the opportunity to buy things for herself before.

"Thanks for coming!"

The shopkeepers were surprisingly pleasant, too, considering their status as slaves.

The girls were now thoroughly burdened by bags of all shapes and sizes, but despite the load, they managed to keep holding hands as they weaved through the crowd.

"Y'know, that was actually a lot of fun."

"Yes, it was. It was the first time I'd even laid eyes on so many of these items. It was hard to focus on the task at hand."

Flum laughed. "I have to admit, I was kinda at a loss for words when I saw you come over with a big grin on your face, holding that fancy cutlery set. That'd pretty much blow our whole budget right there!"

Milkit cast her gaze down to the ground in shame. "I'm truly sorry... I had no idea it cost that much."

Flum suddenly stopped in her tracks. She was looking up at the sign hanging from the store immediately in front of them.

"Can...can I stop in here real quick?"

"Of course. You can do whatever you'd like, Master."

The two were standing in front of the largest bookstore in the capital. Through the windows, Flum could see shelf upon shelf filled with books. The interior of the shop had a dignified feel to it and was filled with well-dressed figures who looked like nobles. This made sense, considering that books were rather expensive items, usually available only to the wealthy. This wasn't exactly the place where slaves would typically venture.

After a moment's hesitation, the girls ventured through the front door. Once inside, they were hit by the familiar scent of ink and paper—and immediately faced with an impressive selection of religious texts for the church of Origin.

In the olden days, the vast majority of books were owned exclusively by the church, far out of the common man's reach. However, as the need for an educated populace grew, so did a desire for books about the church, history, and other knowledge. This pushed the country to develop printing technology, but the printers and booksellers that came into being as a result were still closely associated with the church. In fact, the sign in front of the store was marked with a stylized, intertwined circle—the mark of Origin, the Divine Creator.

That said, the religious texts weren't placed front and center in the store due to some sort of underhanded agreement with the church. Rather, it was simply that they sold well.

To Flum and Milkit, though, the texts were of little interest. They gave them only a passing glance on their way to the floor map. After looking the map over, they headed toward an area in the back of the shop.

"You like to read, Master?"

Flum responded quickly. "Huh? We're not here for me."

Once at their destination, Flum looked over the row of spines before finding the one she was looking for. She pulled it out and inspected the cover closely, as if it were an item of great interest.

Milkit watched on with great curiosity. If Flum wasn't buying a book for herself, then why were they here?

"Then who will read it?"

"I already told you, remember? I said that when things calmed down a bit, I'd teach you how to read. We got a lot more money than I anticipated, so I figured, hey, why not now."

"You were serious about that?"

"What, you thought I just got carried away by making our escape?"

“Well, I didn’t really think that someone would want to go so far for a useless slave like me.”

Flum was beginning to anticipate Milkit’s self-deprecating remarks. Though the corner of a bookstore wasn’t exactly the time or place to try and put an end to them, she did still consider it her solemn duty to help Milkit gain more confidence and stop beating on herself.

And the first step to doing that was to make her more self-reliant.

“Do you want me to live on my own, Master?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead. That’d be quite a ways in the future.”

“But assuming that I do learn and experience all the things you wish to teach me, and I become capable of living alone, then...”

The fear and uncertainty in Milkit’s voice was unmistakable. Flum understood where she was coming from and tried to alleviate some of those concerns.

“Don’t worry about it too much, Milkit. I’m not even sure how I’m going to make it on my own, yet. I wouldn’t let you go, even if you wanted to leave.”

“That’s...that’s not the first time I’ve been told that.”

“You don’t trust me? Do you really think that I’d just set off on my own or abandon you somewhere?”

“I...I don’t know much about trust. But I do hope to spend as much time with you as possible, Master.”

Flum laughed gently at this. “You just described trust right there, Milkit. Trusting someone means that you want to be by their side.”

“Is that...is that what this feeling is?”

Milkit brought her hands to her chest, as if searching in vain for the source of the emotion running through her. Sometimes, when she spoke with Flum, she felt as if her heart were tightening and a storm was raging in her chest, making it hard to breathe. And yet, she...she liked the sensation.

So this was “trust.” Putting a name to the feeling helped her relax a bit.

Flum browsed for a while before she found a good children’s primer she could

use to teach Milkit to read. Once at the counter to make their purchase, Milkit let out a small gasp when she heard the price, but Flum put her hand up to forestall any arguments and quickly paid.

After leaving the bookstore, the two stopped by a stationary shop to buy some writing materials for use in Milkit's studies, before finally turning back to the inn. Their arms were so full at this point that they could no longer hold hands, but fortunately, the much-thinner crowds of the West District made this less of an issue.

"I really don't know if it was such a wise idea to spend so much money on the likes of me..."

"If you're happy, Milkit, then so am I. So don't worry about it so much, 'kay?"

"I really don't understand how someone can feel that way."

"I guess I just like the feeling that I was able to make someone else's life better."

"I'm afraid I don't understand that either, Master."

The idea of someone simply being nice to her was unlike anything Milkit had ever experienced before, which only made her all the more confused. Her previous master had been kind to her on occasion but usually only as a prelude to something worse. He'd enjoying getting Milkit's hopes up and then shattering them.

Such was the life of a slave sold on the black market. Unable to endure the emotional abuse, many resorted to taking their own lives by stabbing themselves in the neck, hanging themselves, or even beating their heads against a wall... All while their masters cackled like hyenas at the sight. Even death held no salvation for them.

Milkit had learned to deny herself any feeling of joy, no matter what kindness she was offered or what she was given. It was a form of self-defense. However, something told her that Flum wasn't going to betray her. She was starting to understand this concept of "trust," though it still troubled her. How was she supposed to repay this girl who had given so much to make her happy?

“You’ll get used to it, Milkit. It’ll all make sense in due time.”

“Will you wait for me until that time?”

Flum turned toward Milkit and smiled broadly. “Absolutely!”

Milkit’s heart tightened again.

She didn’t want to make her master wait. She wanted to understand this strange new concept as soon as possible. What she didn’t realize was that that very emotion—the idea of wanting to do something for someone without receiving anything in return—was precisely what Flum was talking about.

It would be some time before she understood that.

“Wait, hold up! I need that!!”

Right around the time they crossed over into the West District, the girls heard a middle-aged man yelling frantically. A moment later, two men came running past them, nearly knocking into Flum and Milkit in their mad dash.

“Whoa, what the hell?!”

The men looked familiar. They were the adventurers who’d been drinking with Dein in the guild.

“That bag looked awfully expensive, Master.”

“Yeah, you don’t often see something that nice out here in the West District... and that guy back there looks like he fell victim to some sort of foul play. Listen, just hang here for a second, Milkit, and watch the bags. I’ll be right back!”

“Certainly.”

Flum quickly set her bags down and took off after the two men, putting her hand through the Bloodied Gauntlet as she ran. Though it didn’t do anything to help her agility, she figured the boost to her strength stat couldn’t hurt.

Judging by their speed, the two men were probably D-Rank or so—no match for Flum once she had the Souleater equipped. One of them looked back over his shoulder, spotting her in pursuit.

“Damn, it’s that slave girl again!” Apparently realizing that they had little chance of simply outrunning her, they split up and ran off in different

directions.

“Gah. Looks like I gotta let one of ’em get away.”

Flum took off after the man holding the bag, overtaking him in a matter of moments. She stopped in front of him and held up her fist. He pulled out a dagger as if ready to fight, but much to her surprise, attacked her with magic instead.

“Fireball!”

This was a slow, short-range spell, though it could prove deadly in the hands of a powerful spellcaster. Flum spun her body out of the way, easily dodging the attack. Apparently, that had been the man’s plan all along, as he used the opportunity to close the distance between them, dagger aimed straight for her heart.

Unfortunately for him, Flum read his movements as clearly as if the battle were moving in slow motion. Perhaps the effect of an enchantment? She caught the man’s wrist and twisted until she heard an audible snap as the bones gave way. She could even feel the dull popping reverberating through her gauntlet.

“Auuuuuuuugh!!!” The man shrieked in agony, dropped the dagger, and crumpled to the ground. His wrist was twisted at an odd angle, the bones shattered. Flum was taken aback by just how much the Gauntlet boosted her strength.

“Gaaugh, it hurts so bad! Please, please help me!!”

Flum gave the suffering man a quick glance before reaching for the bag.
“Fraid I’m not interested in helping the likes of you.”

Just before she could grab it, though, a small rock about three centimeters in diameter came whizzing past at incredible speed. Thankfully, she was able to pull back just in time to watch it slam into the pavement and shatter. That would have hurt.

Flum looked up to see three more men closing in. One was armed with a spear, another with a sword, and the last with a slingshot—probably the one who launched the rock in her direction.

The man with the spear lunged in first. At about three meters long, it had a fair bit more reach than the Souleater, but judging by how easily Flum deflected it with the side of her blade, its wielder wasn't particularly skilled.

Next up was the man with the sword. Flum spun out of the way when she caught the glint of silver out of the corner of her eye, before returning the blow with the blunt side of her own sword, right into his side.

"Nnghoooo!" The man flew back as if he were struck with a massive hammer.

As the spear wielder hesitated over what to do next, Flum moved in on the man with a slingshot, making sure to keep his comrade between them at all times to prevent him from getting off an attack. The spear wielder launched another strike, which she easily deflected again. While spears had the advantage in ranged combat, they were nothing compared to the sword when in close quarters. Flum hit him in the side with the flat of her sword, sending the man reeling to the ground in agony just like his friend.

That just left the man with the slingshot. Flum closed in on him at a slow, steady pace, using the broad side of her blade to deflect each stone sent her way. Once she was close enough, she lifted the sword up and held it at the ready. She was prepared to destroy him.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

She swung the sword down with immense force...and stopped just short of his head.

The man passed out in terror and dropped to the ground, the crotch of his pants growing dark as he wet himself. Only then did Flum let out a deep sigh of relief.

She'd picked up the stolen bag and was turning to head back to its owner when she heard the man who had escaped her earlier let out a strangled cry of pain.

"Huh, so who do I owe this honor? I suppose I should thank you for stopping him."

Flum looked toward the sound to find a small figure dragging a grown man by the scruff of his neck. The speaker was a blonde girl of around ten or so,

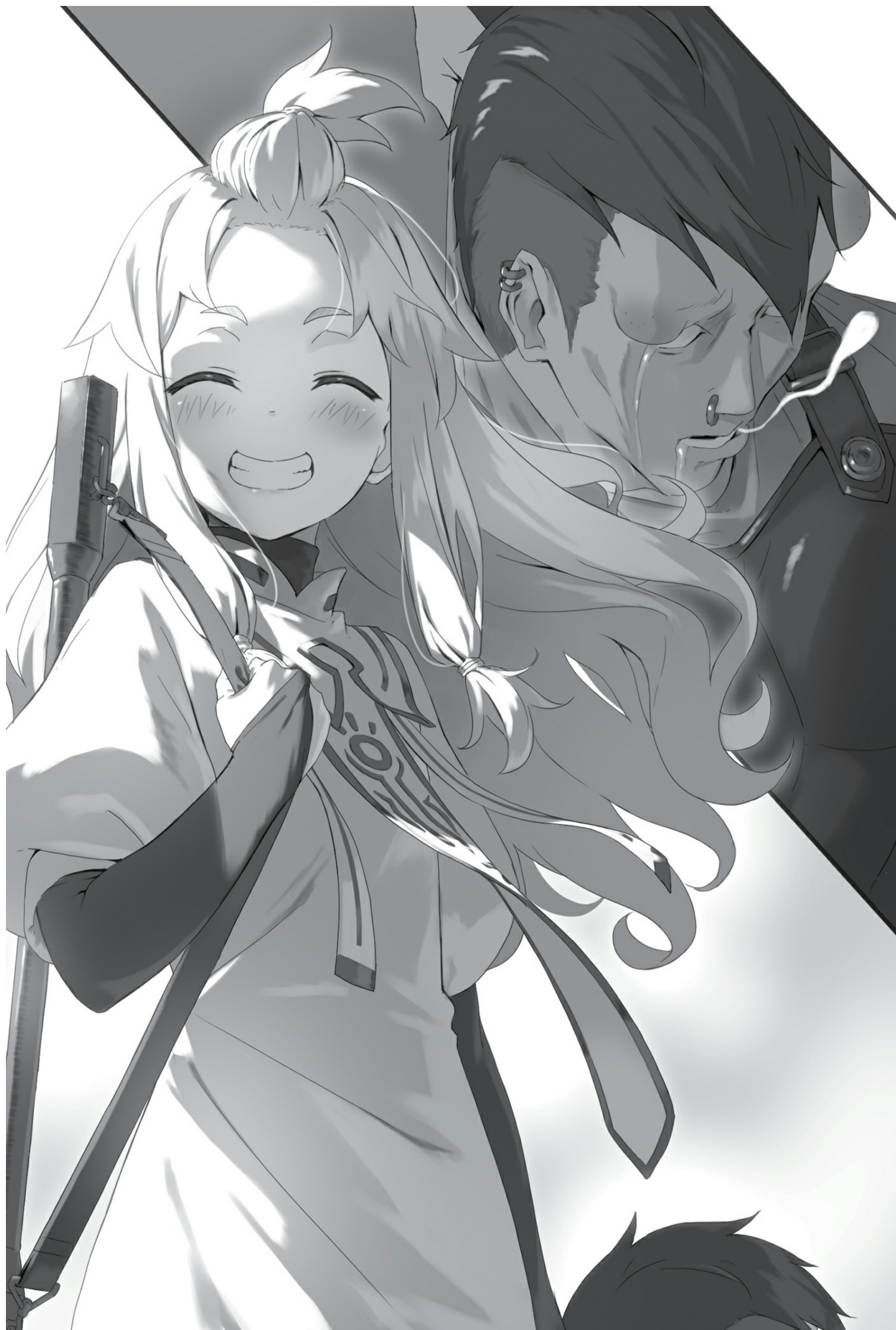
dressed in a white robe and carrying a large mace. With her childish figure clad in a billowing robe, she looked almost like an oversized stuffed animal.

“An Origin nun...?”

Her clothing gave it away. The only people in the capital who dressed like that were the disciples of the church of Origin. Maria had dressed in similar garb, and Flum remembered hearing they were trained to wield maces. The word “nun” might bring to mind the image of a saintly woman using curative magic to heal the wounded, but Flum figured it wasn’t far-fetched for them to also be trained to fight off monsters.

“Huh, it looks like you already took care of these guys. Thanks a bunch!”

After thanking Flum, the young nun bowed her head quickly before breaking out into a toothy smile.



Chapter 8:

The Duality of Purity and the Woman of Light

“THANK YOU! You’re a life saver!”

Once Flum returned the bag to its owner, the man grabbed both her hands in his and shook them enthusiastically, tears brimming from the corners of his eyes. Seen up close, he was only in his 30s, though his stooped posture and the deep creases in his face made him seem much older. Either way, he definitely shouldn’t have been out in the dangerous West District on his own.

“Sorry, I seem to have forgotten my manners. My name is Leitch Mancathy. I run a simple shop nearby.” He introduced himself like a gentleman, ending with a polite bow. The quality of his bag, clothes, and demeanor did give him a certain air of refinement.

There was also something about his name, Mancathy. Flum felt like she’d heard it before, and recently, too, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Milkit tapped Flum on the shoulder and leaned in close to whisper in her ear. “That symbol on the bag. Isn’t that the same as the restaurant where we got dinner?”

Before returning to the West District, they’d made a stop at a large shopping plaza dealing in fresh foods. Now that Milkit mentioned it...

“Oh, that’s right! I know you, from Shoppe Mancathy? But...that place isn’t even remotely small!”

The man, however, remained humble. “It’s still a bit of a work in progress, you see.”

Shoppe Mancathy was the largest shop in the entire capital and frequented by pretty much everyone who lived there. Flum couldn’t comprehend why the owner of such a famous establishment would speak so kindly and humbly to a mere slave.

“May I ask your name, madam?”

“I, uh, I’m Flum. I’m an adventurer here in the West District. And this here is Milkit.”

Milkit curtsied politely. “I am here to support my master.” She really seemed to be embracing the role of a maid, as if inspired by her new clothes.

“Flum and Milkit, yes? It’s truly an honor. Now, if I may be so bold, I believe I’ve seen your face somewhere before, Miss Flum.” Leitch put his hand to his chin as if deep in thought. Flum felt as if her heart would jump out of her chest.

The young nun nodded in agreement. “Ya know, I was thinking exactly the same thing.”

Flum wondered for a moment if they’d heard of her before. After all, she used to be a hero—a member of the party sent to slay the Demon Lord. It wouldn’t be surprising if a member of Maria’s church and a man whose livelihood revolved around meeting people had seen her.

Flum tried to laugh it off, perhaps a bit too obviously. “Probably just your imagination, I think. Ha...hahaha.”

Fortunately—or unfortunately—the two seemed to believe her. “Huh, I see. Apologies for the misunderstanding.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s nothing!” Flum felt a pang at having someone apologize to her when they had actually been right on the mark.

“And you, ma’am,” Leitch continued, addressing the nun, “I take it you’re a holy woman?”

“Who, me? I’m Sara Anvilen, don’tcha know? As you can prolly tell, I’m working hard to serve Origin!” The girl’s small-town roots were evident in the way she spoke. It suited her quite well, though.

“Ah, so you are from the church! Thank you for your assistance. I cannot possibly express my gratitude for your kindness.”

Sara put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest.

“No thanks needed, Pops. Taking out thugs is all a part of a nun’s duties.”

Flum had always thought of nuns as pure, elegant women who were a bit on the weak side—nothing like this battle-hardened girl here. The guy sprawled

out at her feet probably hadn't expected it either.

"So what do we do with these punks, anyway?"

"Now that I have my bag back, I personally think there's nothing further to be done."

"You're probably right. The whoppin' we gave them's gotta be enough."

They were just going to let them go? Flum might understand if the culprits were just poor people making an ill-planned attempt at stealing something, but the goons were adventurers, and D-Rank ones at that. These guys were probably just greedy and out to get some quick money. She seriously doubted a beating would make them repent of their ways.

"I think they should be locked up. If not, they'll just do it again." Of that much, Flum was sure.

However, Sara seemed to disagree. "You don't think people will mend their ways after a good beating? I know I stop what I'm doing whenever my teacher gives me a wallop."

"That's because you're a good person. These...thugs here, they need something a little more extreme if they're going to learn their lesson."

"That's...that's actually kinda sad."

The fact that Sara found this sad confirmed Flum's suspicions about how kindhearted she really was. She leaned down a bit to put herself at eye level with the nun.

"Well, yeah, it is kinda sad. But it's also true. With a little work, though, maybe they can become better people someday. Like you."

"Aw'right, I got this!" Sara's sadness was gone as quickly as it came, further illustrating her cheery innocence. "In that case, we should probably summon the guards, or maybe the knights of the church. What do you think, Mr. Leitch?"

"Since Miss Flum actually lives in the West District, I think it best that we trust her judgment."

"Gotcha! Then I'll call the knights. I know a few people there, anyway." And with that, Sara took off at a run before Flum or Leitch even had a chance to

respond. They watched her vanish into the distance like a tornado that had just swept through a town.

“She’s certainly an excited one,” Milkit said.

“You could say that. Ah, the exuberance of youth...” Flum mused.

Leitch laughed wryly. “You’re both quite young yourselves, you know.”

“I suppose that’s true, but she makes me feel like I’m slowing down.” Flum felt sadness well up within her at the thought of her own lost innocence, but she quickly pushed that feeling aside. What was done was done.

“By the way, Miss Flum...”

“Yes?”

The gentle look from earlier had now been replaced with one of grave seriousness as the older man held Flum’s gaze. She felt herself tense up in surprise at just how quickly his demeanor had changed.

“You know, I was looking for a talented adventurer earlier. I was wondering if you might be interested in taking on a job for me?”

“A job...?”

She *was* officially an adventurer now, but the idea of taking a job from someone she’d only just met—much less the owner of Shoppe Mancathy—was hard to comprehend. She wasn’t against it, exactly, but she figured it’d almost certainly be a pretty big job.

Flum looked down apologetically.

“I’m only an F-Rank adventurer, to be honest. I’m really not all that strong.”

“F-Rank? And you were able to do all that??”

“Well, actually, I only just became an adventurer yesterday. You can see for yourself by using Scan, if you’d like.”

“You... All of your stats are zero? Then how did you even fight like that??”

Flum glanced at her equipment. “It’s all thanks to this.”

The curses on her equipment definitely gave her stats higher than your

average F-Rank adventurer's. But she was still pretty new to all of this, and Flum knew knowledge and experience played an important role in determining an adventurer's skill. She didn't quite have the confidence to claim she was anything more than an F-Rank.

"But even with such low stats, you were able to take those men down with ease."

"It really was nothing..."

"Why, I'd say that your rank is only so low because people haven't figured out how talented you are yet. And as it so happens, a relatively unknown adventurer would be excellently suited to my purposes."

Flum had a weird sense of foreboding at this. Preferring a relatively unknown adventurer meant only one thing: that he wanted to keep this matter under wraps. The fact that he was trying to hire her directly, rather than going through the guild, made it even more suspicious.

Leitch seemed to pick up on Flum's concern, for his expression softened instantly. He seemed to decide it was best to explain himself. "My wife has fallen ill, you see."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But shouldn't you go to the church and seek out a healer?"

"Unfortunately, magic cannot cure my wife's condition. I spoke to a priest, and he simply told me to believe in my wife and that she would have to pull through on her own."

Milkit visibly tensed at this, no doubt recalling the effects of the mustardo toxin on her face.

That could only mean...

"After consulting some literature, I found a mention of something that may be able to cure her."

"Ahhh. And so that's why you want to ask me to take the job?"

If he went through the guild, it would likely get back to the church that he was attempting to have some kind of herbal medicine made—something a man like

Leitch would want to avoid. The church had chased off the kingdom's medical professionals in the interests of their own profits, after all. It wasn't even ancient history. You still frequently heard of underground medicine makers being discovered and charged with the crime of illegal drug manufacturing.

Leitch lowered his eyes to the ground.

"My wife is getting worse with every day that passes. I fear that if I don't act now to get her the medicine she so desperately needs, it may be too late. Of course, I'll pay you handsomely for your assistance. I understand that a job taken on outside the guild will not count toward your ranking up, so I fully intend to pay extra to compensate."

To be frank, Flum couldn't have wished for a better opportunity to come along. As far as she could tell, this job wouldn't be harming anyone, and it saved her having to deal with the scum at the guild. Not to mention denying them their cut of the profits from a high-paying job like this.

"What do you think, Master?"

Flum brought a finger to her chin in thought. "Hmm..."

For all the potential rewards the job offered, it also carried with it a great deal of risk. If the church caught them in the act, Flum could find herself in even bigger trouble than she was already in. On the other hand, she also wanted to do this for Leitch. It was obvious his wife meant a lot to him, and that alone was enough to make up her mind.

Flum turned back to Leitch. "I'd be honored to take on your job."

With those words, the cautious look on Leitch's face melted away, leaving behind a bright smile. Tears began streaming from the corners of his eyes, betraying all that the man had endured.

"Really? Thank you, thank you so much! The mercantile gods are truly smiling upon me!" He clasped his hands in prayer and raised them to the sky as tears ran freely down his cheeks.

After waiting a moment for him to calm down, Flum decided to ask for more details. "Where can these herbs be found, anyway?"

His expression darkened. “Actually...I don’t know. The book mentioned a blue flower known as the kialahri, but that’s about all that was written on it.”

Considering the lengths the church had gone to to get rid of all books on herbal medicine, it was nothing short of a miracle that even that much had survived. Leitch had almost certainly gone to great trouble to get his hands on that book, in hopes of saving his wife.

“I see. And so you’d like me to go find it?”

“That’s right. I know it sounds like a fool’s errand to go look for an herb when I can’t even tell you where it can be found, but unfortunately I’m all out of options.”

He sounded desperate. Even Flum felt uncertain about taking this job, considering she had nothing to go on, but...

“I accept your request, and I promise I won’t give up until I find it.”

She did, after all, happen to know someone who was well versed in the arts of herbal medicine. If she could find her, she might have a chance. The only problem was whether she’d actually help Flum.

Jean’s words came flooding back into her mind.

“Oh, they hesitated, sure. But they ultimately agreed it was for the best.”

“Besides, let’s face it, you were a greater burden on them than anyone else.”

Everyone in the party had hated having her around, at least if what he said could be believed. Jean’s words sank deep into Flum’s heart, almost like an acid slowly eating its way through her. If he was right, then it seemed unlikely Eterna would help them.

“However, it may take some time.”

“My wife doesn’t have long in this world, but she’s not in grave peril at this very moment. All I can ask of you is to work as fast as possible, though I understand that isn’t very helpful. I have all the information I’ve been able to gather on the kialahri at my home. Please stop by when you have a chance.”

“Got it.”

With impeccable timing, Sara rejoined them just as the conversation was wrapping up. Two soldiers dressed in white plate armor came running up behind her.

“Ed, Jonny, over here!”

“Whoa, looks like you got a whole bunch of ’em this time. Dragging them back is gonna be a pain...”

“Hey, you should be happy for the work. Now hurry up and get these thugs outta here.”

The soldier named Ed laughed and patted Sara’s head affectionately. “Shoulda expected it when you were the one to report the incident.”

She squirmed in annoyance and tried to brush his hand away, though it was clear from the way they behaved around each other that the three were quite close. The knights conjured a magical ring of light and used that to bind the unconscious men. After asking Leitch, Flum, and Milkit for a brief statement concerning what happened, they dragged the men away.

Sara waved enthusiastically after them as they departed. “G’luck!”

It looked to Flum like the girl had been running non-stop since she left just a short time ago. She was covered in sweat, but she was also beaming proudly. This young nun was certainly an excitable one.

Once the knights were out of sight, Sara addressed Flum. “I really hope those guys have a better outlook when they get outta jail.”

“Me too. With any luck, they’ll turn their lives around.”

She really meant it, too. It’d help improve the bad reputation the West District had and also knock Dein down a peg or two.

“So heya, Leitch. There was something I was meanin’ ta ask you.”

Leitch responded casually. “Yes?”

Sara cocked her head to the side as she inspected his face closely. “You’re not worried about something, are ya? Say...about some kind of herbal medicine, maybe?”

Flum felt her heart begin to race. How did she know...?

Leitch paused for only the briefest of moments before responding with a calm face. "Hm, nothing like that, no."

However, Flum could sense that his heart was pounding much like her own. After all, there was no way Sara could have overheard their conversation. So why would she ask that?

"Hmm...I see."

"And what makes you ask that?"

"The look on your face reminded me of someone I'd met before. They looked exactly the same, and they had a similar problem. But, ya know, being a nun and all, they wouldn't exactly open up to me, so I was thinking if you had the same problem, I could go look around and get it for you."

"You, a member of the church, provide someone with herbal medicine?"

"Who cares about that? It's my job to help those in need. At least that's what Miss Maria always taught me!"

"Maria...?"

Sara's eyes took on a twinkle of admiration.

"Maria is amazing! She's off on a heroic journey right now, but she always looked after me when we were together at the church."

Flum was now certain that she was talking about Maria Affenjenz, though there was a bit of a gap between the Maria whom Flum knew and the one Sara described. It was true that Maria was kind, but whenever she came face to face with a monster, her demeanor changed entirely. Also, just as Jean had so cheerfully pointed out, Maria never bothered to use her healing magic on Flum, calling into doubt just how much of a "holy" woman she truly was if she could so easily differentiate between those who deserved kindness and those who didn't.

To be fair, Flum could still see a certain logic to it. She'd been useless in practically every way to the party, so it may have been easy for Maria to dismiss her as unworthy.

“Honestly, I think it’s strange that the church forbids the use of medicines. If they can heal people of ailments that magic can’t fix, then we should use whatever we can get our hands on! But, uh, don’t tell anyone I said this, ’kay? The church officials would be pretty mad.”

The three exchanged surprised glances at Sara’s comments. This was hardly something they’d expected to hear from a member of the church. Leitch fixed the young girl with a serious gaze, as if inspecting her carefully to see if she could be trusted.

“I get where you’re comin’ from, especially considering everything the church’s done. But please understand that I want to help you any way I can, Mr. Leitch. Besides, the church still has some supplies of herbs!”

“The church has herbs?!”

“Only certain ones, but yup. I’ve seen ’em myself.”

Flum’s mind wandered for a moment over what use the church could possibly have for keeping these around. However, that didn’t matter right now—not if they had any information on where the kialahri could be found.

Leitch had two difficult choices facing him: it was clearly best to not discuss her and risk more than he already had, but talking to her could also solve many of his problems.

“For what it’s worth, I think we can trust her,” Flum said.

“And what makes you say that?”

“The look of innocence in her eyes, really. She doesn’t seem to be lying, in my opinion, and I’m usually a pretty good judge of character.”

Leitch closed his eyes for a moment to think it over. When he opened them again, it was clear he’d made up his mind. “If that’s your opinion, then...”

Caution was key to being a businessman, but so was knowing when to trust others. Both had helped Leitch transform Shoppe Mancathy into the massive complex it was now. Those years of experience now served as the basis for his decision.

“Well, I do actually have a problem concerning some herbal medicine, Miss

Sara.”

“I knew it!” Sara beamed.

“You see, my wife has fallen ill, and I need to acquire a medicinal herb called kialahri if I hope to cure her.”

“Kialahri? Hmm... Never heard of it before, but I bet I can find something if I do a little digging!”

“I’m happy to hear that. I’ve already asked Miss Flum here to assist with finding it, so possibly you two could work together? I’ll pay you, of course.”

“No need for that, Pops! Helping people is my job, and besides, I get a stipend from the church.”

Flum couldn’t help but admire this young girl’s selfless devotion to helping others. In fact, it made her second-guess her own morals, considering how readily she’d accepted the payment offered up by Leitch.

“Why, I couldn’t possibly...”

“Really, it’s nothing. Besides, if the church officials found out I was making some cash on the side, they’d be pretty peeved. I’ve had enough whippings, thank-you-very-much.” Sara’s face clouded over and she unconsciously rubbed her lower back, as if remembering a painful incident in the past.

This caused Leitch to chuckle lightly. If that were the case, then so be it. And with that, they set out for Leitch’s house to begin formulating a plan to find the kialahri.

Leitch gave the three girls the information he’d gathered, and they went on their separate ways to see what they could find, with Sara immediately making her way to the church to dig through the records there while Flum did a cursory check of all the book stores and libraries in the capital. Much to Flum’s disappointment, they both came back empty-handed.

Two days after their initial meeting, Sara stopped by Flum and Milkit’s hotel with a memo written in what could only charitably be called chicken scratch. According to her, however, what was written there was the name of the cave in

which the kialahri was found.

Sara beamed as she spoke. “It took a little bit of sneaking around, but I finally got the information I was looking for.”

Apparently, the books containing information on the kialahri were kept somewhere hidden from most of the church members. Flum felt a pang of regret over the risks that Sara was taking on their behalf.

According to what Sara had found, the cave was located near a village known as Anichidey.

“It’s apparently a real small town, like, ‘I don’t even know if they have an inn’ kind of small. Would be good if we could find someone to be our guide.”

“You know, I feel like I’ve heard of a place called Anichidey before.”

“Isn’t that where Stude the innkeeper said he’s from, Master?”

“You know, you’re right!”

“You mean that super cheerful guy downstairs?”

The three girls left the room in a hurry to go find Stude. Flum was hesitant to describe the whole herbal medicine situation to him, so she fudged the details a bit, saying only that she had taken a job that would send her to Anichidey.

This took Stude by surprise, but only for a moment, before his gentle smile returned and he gave a hearty laugh. “Now what would possess you to head to a little podunk town like that? Well, you’re certainly in luck! Not only does my family run the one and only inn in Anichidey, but I’ve been planning on going to see my mum lately.”

He’d volunteered himself as their guide before they could even ask. He really was a good guy.

Now that they actually had a plan in place to acquire the much-needed kialahri, the girls made their way to Leitch’s home to get him up to date. His eyes welled up with tears of joy when he heard about Anichidey and their plan. He was a surprisingly emotional man, Flum privately thought. It was actually pretty impressive that he’d made it this far as a businessman.

When they asked about making arrangements for a cart, Leitch insisted on

taking care of everything, including all the associated travel costs.

“Now that we have transportation and Stude to help us out, I think Milkit and I can take care of things from here.”

It was a four-day trip to Anichidey and back, not counting the time they’d need to spend there. There was simply no way that Sara could take that much time away from the church. Or so Flum thought. Instead, Sara balked at the mere suggestion.

“I’m goin’, too!”

After several stubborn rounds of going back and forth like this, Milkit finally chimed in. “I don’t see a problem with it, Master.”

This was all that was needed to tilt the balance in Sara’s favor and Flum finally gave in. When she expressed concern about people noticing she was gone, Sara only smirked.

“Don’tcha worry about it. Us nuns are always heading off to go help people.”

She seemed confident, so it must be all right. Or at least Flum hoped so.

Their departure was set for the next morning. They’d leave at first light.

The night before they were set to leave, Milkit lay in bed, her mind a flurry with thoughts and anxiety over what would be the first trip she’d ever taken in her life. She stared at the darkened roof, unable to sleep.

Suddenly a voice called out through the darkness from the other bed. “You asleep, Milkit?”

“Not yet. I’m...nervous, I suppose.”

Flum giggled. “Oh, you, too?” She was feeling much the same way. “Well, why don’t we talk a bit, then?”

“I think I’d like that.”

“Hmm... Well then, what should we talk about? Umm...”

“In that case, may I ask a question?”

“Absolutely! Shoot.” Flum’s voice took on an excited tone at the prospect that Milkit was showing some interest in her.

“Have you ever traveled anywhere before, Master?”

Apparently, despite all the time the two had spent together, Milkit hadn’t yet picked up on the fact that Flum was once a member of the famed party of heroes. She might not even know the party existed in the first place, considering she’d lived her life as a slave. Flum had avoided the topic so far, but now that Milkit had expressed some interest in learning more about her, she figured it was about time to reveal something about herself.

Honestly, it was probably better for their relationship that she mentioned it before Milkit happened to find out on her own.

“Actually, I traveled with the chosen heroes.”

“Oh?”

Flum couldn’t see her face through the darkness, but it was clear from her tone that Milkit was confused. To be fair, she didn’t really have much in the way of proof to back up her claims.

“Heroes... Could you please give me an example of what that means?”

“Hmm. Well, you know, like the heroes you’ve always heard about. I’m sure you know of Cyrill, right? Cyrill Sweechka?”

“I’ve heard of her, yes.”

“Well, I traveled with her, Eterna, Gadhio, and a few other famous people for several months.”

Even someone as disinterested in the goings-on of the outside world as Milkit had at least heard those names before. She rolled over onto her side and stared off into the darkness in the direction of Flum’s voice.

“You mean to say that you were one of these chosen heroes, Master?”

“That’s right. Hard to believe from what you see now, though.”

“I think you’re amazing, Master.”

Flum caught sight of Milkit’s intense gaze peeking through her bandages. It

was a look of absolute respect and devotion. She let out a nervous laugh as their eyes met.

“Honestly, I’m really nothing special. I just happened to be chosen by Origin and therefore sent on the journey. That’s all before I was sold off to a slave trader and forever branded with this cursed mark, though.”

Even now, she was still puzzled by the fact that Origin had chosen her. She still often cursed her fate, wishing the god had just left her alone.

“Oh, so that’s why...” Milkit sounded convinced, but of what was anyone’s guess.

“What is it?”

“Even though we were both slaves, there was something that just seemed special about you.”

She was talking about the first time they met, when they were both locked together in that basement cell. There had been something about Flum that just stood out to her.

“I looked at you and could tell that there was still a certain optimism in you. It was like nothing I’d ever seen in other slaves. I couldn’t understand what we were doing in the same dank cell, but it all makes sense now, knowing that you’d only recently become a slave. I’m sure that there’s a place out there where you belong, Master.”

Flum stuck out her lip in annoyance. “Why do you make it sound like *you’re* already a lost cause?”

“Well, because it’s true.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I guess I have no choice but to take you along with me wherever I go.”

“You’re still going on about that, Master?” Despite her attempt to sound troubled, there was an obvious hint of excitement in Milkit’s voice.

“You don’t like that idea?”

“...I do. And that’s what’s so troubling.”

Flum laughed. "That's good, then."

Milkit also laughed, a sound so soft it could easily have been missed over the noise of the wind. "I hope our trip tomorrow goes well."

"Yeah, and once we get back and get paid, we'll treat ourselves to a fancy dinner."

"Today's lunch was quite good. I don't believe I've ever eaten anything like that before."

"Lunch? That wasn't anything special, you know. But if you liked it, then let's go again, huh?"

There was a hint of excitement in Milkit's voice once again. "Let's."

As the two spoke through the night, their worries over the upcoming trip began to fade, though they never entirely went away. In fact, the longer they talked, the more they forgot that they were even supposed to be sleeping.

After this continued on for some time, Flum finally came to terms with the anxiety she felt and closed her eyes. "G'night."

"Sweet dreams, Master."

And with that, silence fell over the room as the moon continued its lazy course across the sky. Once the sun was up, their journey would begin.

Chapter 9:

And We Meet Again

F LUM, MILKIT, AND SARA sat in the back of the gently swaying cart as they munched on their lunch. There was enough food for four people, but Stude was currently passed out in the bed of the cart, snoring loudly. Once they caught sight of the soft, white bread wrapped around meats and vegetables, and drenched in a spicy sauce, they could hardly stop themselves. The sauce was sweet and didn't have too much of a kick to it.

Sara shoved the whole bun into her mouth. "Yum!"

Flum broke out into a hearty laugh at the sight of Sara's squirrel cheeks.

"I'm honored to hear it."

"Whoa, you made this, Milkit??"

"It's really nothing special." Milkit had woken early to prepare lunch for them, though the food was provided by Stude.

Flum giggled. "No way, this is great! Just look at Sara over there! I wish I could swallow them whole like that, too."

Sara tried to argue back, but it was impossible to understand her over all the food in her mouth.

"Eww, don't talk with your mouth full! Besides, I think we got off track here. Milkit, did you make this all yourself?"

"Yes, why?"

"Wow, that's incredible! You're quite the chef, Milkit!"

Milkit averted her gaze to stare down at her feet, embarrassed at the sudden praise. She'd learned much about cooking in her many years as a slave.

Though Flum was a decent cook herself, this was something else entirely. She continued to munch on the bread as she thought hard about what kind of recipe she'd ask Milkit to teach her about next.

“So what is this Anichidey place like, anyway?” Flum asked.

Sara mumbled something incomprehensible around a mouthful of food.

Flum tried her best to not laugh as she scolded her friend. “Seriously, Sara, just finish chewing your food before you talk!”

Sara swallowed the food in a single gulp. Flum worried for a second that she was going to choke, but apparently, it had gone down without a problem. Ahh, what it was like to be young.

“Aaaanyway, as I was saying, it’s basically an unremarkable town in the middle of nowhere, though it used to be booming thanks to all the herbs they grew there. Stude would know more than me, though.”

“I mean, that was all well before we were born though, right? The crackdown came right after the war between the humans and monsters.”

The war had ended around thirty years ago. It had begun quite suddenly, with demons suddenly invading human lands without warning. The royal army was mobilized at once and managed to drive back the invaders, though at great cost to human life.

The church had participated in the war and actually proved quite successful on the field of battle, which had done a lot to further reinforce the ties between church and the state. In fact, the church of Origin wasn’t the only religion in the kingdom at that time, though it was by far the largest. There were still many followers of various folk religions out in the countryside, though most of those traditions had fallen into obscurity over the past thirty years.

“Imma tell ya, I really don’t know why the church hates herbal medicine so much.”

“You mean they don’t even tell their members why?”

“They say that using medicine weakens your faith in god or that it makes healing magic less effective, but those explanations all suck. But most people still believe ’em anyway.”

The cart’s wheel hit a large rock, causing it to rise and then fall with a heavy thud, sending Sara tumbling off her seat. Flum caught a glimpse of a blue tattoo

on the back of the girl's neck.

"Hey, Sara, what's that on your neck?"

"Oh, this ol' thing?" Sara ran her finger along the marking. "My hometown... Well, what used to be my hometown, I guess, 'cause it's gone now... Anyway, we used to belong to a different church back then. My parents were super into it, and they had me given the mark of a follower when I was real young. They used a special kind of paint on it, so it never goes away."

Flum was all too familiar with this paint. It was probably the same kind used on her slave brand.

Before she had a chance to ask about what Sara meant by "used to be" her hometown, the girl continued on.

"My hometown was completely wiped out by the demons, ya know, about eight years or so ago. I was just two at the time, so I don't really remember anything about it." Sara offered up a weak smile. "Maria was pretty much the same, so I guess that's why she was always so nice to me."

"Maria, too?"

Flum and Maria didn't really talk much about their personal lives, so this was the first she'd heard of this. It explained why she got so weird when she came face to face with demons, at least. Anyone would hate the creatures that destroyed everything they'd loved. Maria was the member of the party most passionate about their mission to slay the Demon Lord, and far as she saw it, someone like Flum had no business being there and wasn't worthy of healing.

"Demons are still coming across the border and laying waste to entire human settlements, ya know."

"Even now??"

"They don't talk about it in the news much, but some smaller towns have been wiped off the map."

Flum hadn't seen anything remotely like this in any of the national newspapers. That could only mean that the church had its own unofficial information network. Considering how willing Sara was to share the church's

secrets, including the location of these much-needed herbs, it was apparent she didn't necessarily agree with all its policies.

"Fortunately, no one's died, at least. That'd be unforgivable! I'd give those stupid demons what they've got comin'!" Sara pumped her fist energetically.

Even though she remembered nothing about the destruction of her home, the bitterness of the loss clearly still stuck with her, as did her disdain for the monsters who continued to destroy people's livelihoods for no reason. Flum understood her anger all too well, but there was something Sara said that struck her as odd: how was it that the demons had apparently laid waste to entire villages without killing a single person?

After all, Flum had seen the power of the Demon Chiefs first hand. It was practically inconceivable that they could take even a careless swipe at a small village without incinerating everyone living within it. There could only be survivors if they had deliberately intended not to kill anyone in the first place.

She didn't dare bring it up in front of Sara, someone who'd lost everything she knew at the hands of the monsters, but Flum was curious as to why the demons would continue these attacks, then. Well, perhaps the reason was quite obvious—the humans had been continuously invading their lands, after all. Perhaps destroying these villages was their form of revenge.

Sara bit hard into her bread and tore off another piece. "But I still have a lot of training to do before I can fight 'em for real."

"Speaking of which, you're pretty strong, Sara. You really roughed that thief up back in the West District."

"Eh, we were able to double-team those creeps. Anyway, can I have seconds?"

"That wouldn't be right..."

"I don't see anything wrong with it."

"If you say so, Master. Here you are, Sara."

Sara nodded enthusiastically and grinned at the proffered food before taking another bite of bread. She mumbled something through another mouthful of

food, which Milkit somehow understood as Sara instructing her to cast Scan to check her stats.

“R-right. Scan!”

Milkit’s whole body shook slightly from sheer nervousness over casting what would be her very first magic spell. She’d only learned it last night, when Flum took the opportunity to teach it to her after they were finished with their reading practice. Despite her misgivings, it only took about an hour or so for Milkit to get the hang of it. It was, after all, an incredibly easy spell, and one that would often come in handy.

It took them another couple hours to get through that night’s reading lesson. Even though they were only going over a few simple words and numbers, Milkit was completely entranced in the activity. It had brought a smile to Flum’s cheeks to see the girl so captivated by something.

Being able to use Scan allowed Milkit to see things which were usually invisible to the naked eye. She was so excited by the prospect that she started casting it on anything and everything. Fortunately, once you learned a spell, you basically knew it for life.

Flum smiled reassuringly in an attempt to put Milkit at ease. “Don’t worry, you got this.”

It seemed to have the desired effect, as she noticed Milkit’s body visibly relax and her pupils begin to glow. Milkit’s gaze took on a distant look as she focused on the words and numbers appearing at the edges of her vision.

Flum giggled to herself at the sight. She decided to cast Scan on Sara herself to see what Milkit was looking at.

Sara Anvilen

Affinity: Light

Strength: 285

Magic: 301

Endurance: 123

Agility: 227

Perception: 133

She was, in a word, surprised. These kinds of stats were unheard of for a ten-year-old girl. With a total stat value of 1,069, that just barely edged Sara into the threshold of a C-Rank adventurer. She would undoubtedly only get better with age, too.

It was starting to make sense to Flum why the church let her get away with so much: the girl was a powerhouse.

Suddenly self-conscious in the presence of such a powerful young girl, Flum equipped her gauntlet and summoned forth her blade before casting Scan on herself.

Name: Souleater Zweihänder

Tier: Epic

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Strength by 320]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Magic by 99]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Endurance by 297]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Agility by 183]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Perception by 111]

[This equipment causes its wearer's body to melt]

Name: Bloodied Steel Gauntlets

Tier: Rare

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Strength by 82]

[This equipment lowers its wearer's Magic by 101]

That gave her a total stat value of 1,193, just barely edging out Sara. This made her feel somewhat better. Interestingly enough, it seemed like the curse on the Souleater had grown more powerful, even if only slightly so, after she'd killed the anzu with it.

Whether she or Sara would grow stronger first, however, was anyone's guess. To be fair, it wasn't actually a competition. Flum knew that she shouldn't think about it so much, but something about the way Sara admired her made her want to be someone worth looking up to.

It was now Sara's turn to cast Scan on the both of them. "I see your clothes are just Common items. No enchantments on 'em, right?"

"I suppose I could afford to buy some Rare clothing if I wasn't too concerned about looks."

"You're right there. Most of the really powerful clothes are all pretty tacky." The merits and demerits of fashion wouldn't really register on Scan, anyway. Sara looked down at herself and seemed to shrink. "It really looks good on ya, though, Flum. Look at this foofy thing I've gotta wear. I look like a little kid in it!"

"All in due time, all in due time," Flum teased the younger girl, but to be honest, she was pretty devoid of feminine curves herself. She glanced down at her own chest and sighed inwardly.

Never one to stay down for long, Sara turned her attention to Milkit next. "And Milkit... I'm so jealous! All that frilly lace and the ribbon on your chest—that outfit's cute to the max! Maybe someday I can wear something as nice as that."

Flum tried to imagine Sara dressed up as a maid. She'd look cute, of course,

but maybe just a bit too much like a doll for Flum's liking. She turned her attention back to Milkit.

"Milkit picked this out on her own, you know. I think it looks great on her. I dunno what it is, but just seeing her around really cheers me up."

"I know, right?? I wish I had someone like that."

Flum pulled Milkit into a tight embrace. "No way! She's my own personal maid, I'll have you know."

Milkit fidgeted uncomfortably, still not quite used to being praised at all, much less having it heaped on like this. She looked up at Flum, as if pleading her to have mercy. "Are you two perhaps teasing me?"

Flum chuckled. "Aww, was it that obvious?"

"Nah, Milkit's just that perceptive."

"That's true! And I think I'm allowed to brag about my maid a little."

Milkit's bandages shifted about as her cheeks puffed out. "Please don't tease me like that..."

Though she still tried to brush off any attempts to praise her, Milkit had started to allow herself to enjoy the compliments. It was still embarrassing for her, sure, but her outlook was shifting considerably. She and Flum had grown quite close in the few days they'd been living together.

Sara looked at the two of them and smiled. "Aww, I'm really jealous of y'all."

She thought back on Maria, the woman who'd been like an older sister to her. She knew that Maria was busy doing important work, and that she was in no position to try to place any demands on her time. And yet...seeing how close Flum and Milkit were caused a feeling of loneliness to well up inside her.

Though the trip was rather long and boring, the party passed the time bantering among themselves. When Stude finally woke up, he kept the three girls entertained with stories about Anichidey, some off-color jokes, and everything else in between.

About halfway to their destination, they stopped in at a town along the way to rest to get some dinner—a local delicacy was on offer—and rest for the night. After checking on the horses and making sure the weather was suitable for travel, they set off again early the next morning. It was around nightfall when they finally arrived at their destination—Anichidey.

The four piled out of the cart, which continued on its journey to the next town over. It would be back to pick them up in three days' time. If they didn't find the herbs by the time it arrived, then they would have to schedule a different pickup, but Flum felt certain they would be done by then.

Flum, Milkit, and Sara stared at the town before them. There were quite a few houses around, though only a few had any lights in the windows. The streets were also completely dark, even what should have been the main street. They had to break out their lanterns, originally meant for their cave expedition, just to make their way around town.

Stude broke out into a hearty laugh at their surprise. "Gahahaha! Pretty impressive, ain't it? I told you there's nothing here!"

"It really is a ghost town."

"People...people do actually live here, right?"

He didn't miss a beat. "About a few dozen, maybe? But they're all old farts, so I imagine the whole town'll be empty in about a decade or so."

His tone was still quite cheerful. Either he wasn't worried about it, or he'd already come to terms with the town's fate.

"How can an inn make any money in a place like this?"

"It's usually closed, but they open it back up whenever a traveler makes their way through town. Anyway, just follow me. The rooms are pretty big, and the beds are comfy, at least."

Stude set off with the three girls in tow. They passed along storefront after storefront, all long-closed, before turning off of the main street into what looked to be a residential area.

"This whole street was teeming with life when I was a little runt, back in the

day.”

“I guess this is what happens when a town loses its main source of income.”

“I’m just impressed it’s managed to hang on for thirty years, actually.”

“You can say that again. And even if there’s nothing here, you can’t change where your roots are. Your home’s still your home, y’know? So people just want to keep hanging on, which I guess is what’s kept the town going.”

This time, sadness washed across Stude’s face as he gazed at the empty and neglected houses. Even if he’d accepted its fate, it had to hurt to see his hometown like this.

The group walked for some time before stopping in front of one of the few houses with a light on inside.

“I’m gonna stop in and talk to Ma real quick. You guys just wait here.”

The three waited dutifully outside what was apparently Stude’s home. According to what he told them on the long ride here, his father had fallen ill and passed away around ten years ago. It was pretty tragic, especially since his father’s illness could have been cured if the herbs that once grew in abundance across the countryside had still been available.

Ever since then, his mother had lived alone while Stude went off to the capital to try and make his fortune. It’d worked well for some time, but now that she was getting older, things were getting difficult for her. In fact, his mother was one of the reasons why he had decided to close his inn.

About five minutes later, Stude appeared at the doorway with his mother. After a brief round of introductions, she led the group to the inn located next door.

“Wow, this is quite impressive.”

The building was a huge affair and could probably house every resident of Anichidey should the need arise. It was hard to imagine that this place had been fully booked during the town’s prosperous years, and even had to turn customers away.

“Don’t worry, I keep the place tidy.” Stude’s mother unlocked the front door

and ushered the group inside before lighting a candle she brought from her home to lead them to their rooms. The building had been built decades ago, long before the creation of any modern conveniences like magical lanterns, but the soft glow of candlelight gave everything a rather warm feel.

“The room on the right has a double bed and the one on the left has two twins. Which’ll it be?”

The three girls took a vote, and it was quickly decided to go for the double. Opening the door, they were greeted by an impeccably clean room that was far larger than you’d expect from a town of this size. It was hard to believe that it hadn’t been used for so long, thanks to the spotless cleaning job. Old habits must have died hard for Stude’s mother.

“You can use the kitchen to cook up any food you’ve brought with you, if you’d like.”

“Is there anywhere around to buy groceries?”

Stude’s mother offered up a sad smile at Flum’s question. “There’s a little old lady who runs a shop just off the main street, but I doubt she’s open at this hour. Why don’t you come on over to my place, and I’ll fix something up for you?”

Sara clasped her hands tightly, her eyes twinkling. “You’ll really make dinner for us??”

A wry smile came to Stude’s mother’s face at Sara’s excitement.

“I’ll have to ask you to pay, of course. Sadly, I can’t quite afford to put on a feast for free, even for girls as charming as yourselves.”

After giving them a brief overview of the hotel’s facilities, she handed Flum the key to her room. She and Sara hurried in to set down their bags. Once that was out of the way, the two girls locked eyes in front of the bed.

“You ready?”

“Yup!”

They took off at a run and dove headfirst toward the bed.

Pwoomf!

They sank deep into the soft, down-filled comforter and just stayed there for a while, enjoying the soft embrace.

“Hmm?” Milkit looked up from where she had been busily arranging their things to stare on in confusion at the two’s behavior.

Flum mumbled through the heavy comforter, encouraging Milkit to come join them. If that was her master’s will, she had no choice but to oblige. Milkit moved toward the bed at a slow jog before hopping onto it.

It was quite a scene.

Milkit still had no idea what they were even doing, but she could feel a sense of excitement—perhaps even fun—well up inside her. Her muffled voice resonated through the heavy comforter. “May I ask what the point of this is?”

“Don’t you just want to dive on in whenever you see a comfy-looking bed?”

“Heck yeah!”

“So...that’s why?”

Flum sighed. It still didn’t make any sense to Milkit, but she figured that it didn’t need to make sense as long as it was still fun.

Eventually, the three girls sat up in bed and began chatting about anything that came to mind as the sun dropped below the horizon.

Just as they were starting to get hungry, Stude showed up to call the girls for dinner. He suggested they might want to take a bath at his mother’s place, so they took a change of clothes with them, too.

The table was spread with quite a feast—or at least what could best be considered a feast in such a small town—with various comfort foods made from locally sourced vegetables. There was too much food for the five people at the table to even come close to finishing. Stude’s mother had clearly gone the extra mile on this, since it was the first time she’d had guests in quite a while.

Flum worried about offending the kind woman by leaving anything uneaten, but much to her surprise, Sara tore into the food at a furious pace. Even Flum, whose appetite had grown thanks to all her recent exercise, was surprised at

the sheer volume of what the girl put away. While Milkit was still working her way through a potato one bite at a time, Sara managed to clean off an entire plate.

Stude's mother looked taken aback but smiled warmly at the sight. "Stude here was quite the eater when he was young but nothing like you, dearie."

After dinner, including a generous helping of dessert, Sara's stomach was visibly plumper than it had been before they ate.

"Man, I'm stuffed."

"Do you have two stomachs or something, Sara??"

"Oh, come on, I didn't eat that much..."

"You certainly ate quite an impressive amount." Even Milkit couldn't get past the sheer amount of food that Sara packed away.

Once they'd helped Stude's mother do the dishes, it was time for a bath. Unlike the hotel, unfortunately, the bath here was just about big enough for one person at a time. Sara looked disappointed at this and stuck out her lower lip.

"Darn, I was really looking forward to soakin' together like this was a real vacation."

To be fair, this wasn't actually meant to be a vacation.

After the three girls took their baths in turns, they bid their goodbyes to Stude and his mother before returning to the inn, where they changed into their pajamas and once again dove into the bed.

"So now we're supposed to talk about our love lives, yeah? I mean, that's what you do on sleepovers."

Sara's youthful exuberance made Flum feel rather old. Since none of them actually had any love life of which to speak, that conversation ultimately went nowhere. Sara wasn't about to admit defeat, however, and tried a variety of other topics for a while before the exhaustion of their long trip finally caught up to her, and she fell asleep.

"Funny how she can go from being so hyper to asleep in just a matter of

moments.”

“She doesn’t hold back in anything she does, I suppose.”

“You’re right. I hope she holds on to that passion as she gets older.” Flum was beginning to sound like an old woman.

“You’re still quite young yourself, Master.”

Flum laughed lightly at this. “Just watching Sara makes me feel old, y’know? Anyway, us grandmas better get some sleep, too.”

Despite the relatively early hour, she reached out to extinguish the lamp. After a moment, Milkit’s voice called out timidly from the darkness.

“Umm... Master?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t be sleeping on the floor?”

Flum brought her hand to her face in exasperation. “You’re still asking questions like that after all we’ve been through?”

Apparently, old habits died hard. Well, she had one weapon left in her arsenal to use against Milkit. Flum reached out and grabbed the other girl’s hand, intertwining their fingers.

Milkit gasped lightly.

“You can’t go anywhere now, yeah? Now get some sleep.”

A concerned look washed over Milkit’s face before she finally gave in. Her bandages rustled slightly as her face softened into a smile. She spoke barely above a whisper before closing her own eyes to sleep.

“Thank you, Master.”

“Wake up, sleepyhead!!”

The next morning, Flum was woken by a very excited Sara. Having spent the majority of her life in a church, the girl was used to living on a strict schedule—which included rising with the sun.

It was early even for Milkit, who was used to starting her day before most. However, as soon as she woke, she instantly turned toward Flum to greet her master. Flum rubbed her eyes in a desperate attempt to try and rouse herself.

Once they were dressed and ready, the girls made their way outside to find some groceries and gather what information they could. Frankly speaking, the town was even more depressing now that it was fully illuminated by the morning sun. It was clear that the main street had once been a place filled with bustling shops, but now that was nothing but a distant memory. The majority of the storefronts remained empty, their only identifying marks being the slowly decaying signs that marked their business.

The girls made their way down the street, glancing at the empty buildings along the way as they searched for a place that was actually open. They finally found a greengrocer and a shop selling daily necessities open for business near where the cart driver had dropped them off.

Flum peeked into one of the shops to find a bespectacled older woman sitting behind the counter reading a book. It took her a moment to finally notice Flum.

“Oh, it’s been quite some time since I’ve seen an unfamiliar face. Are you a customer, by chance?”

Sara cheerfully butted in before Flum could answer and ran toward the counter. “We came all the way from the capital!”

“From the capital, huh? And you’re all dressed in some pretty interesting attire, I see. It’s been a while since I’ve seen quite a sight. Alas, there are no herbs left to harvest.”

“I understand that they’re not being harvested, but I assume they’re still growing somewhere?”

The older woman sighed. “That’s true. They still grow out in the caves outside of town. Alas, they’re infested with monsters and no one dares get too close. It’s no place for a group of young girls like you.”

Flum leaned in closer. “What kind of monsters live there?”

“How would I know? I haven’t seen them for myself, but from what I hear, they’re pretty terrifying. None of the adventurers who’ve gone into the caves

looking for the herbs have ever come back out.”

“Not even...one?”

The older woman looked off into the distance.

“Not a single one. In fact, just this morning a group of men stopped by to ask about the caves. Kinda strange to have two groups of y’all come by in the same day. Anyway, they’re probably dead by now.”

There was a certain sense of finality in the way she spoke that caused a silence to fall over the three girls. Just what kind of bizarre creatures inhabited the cave was anyone’s guess, but they weren’t about to just give up on the kialahri now. Not after coming so far.

After buying some food, they made their way back to the inn to prep some lunch to take with them to the cave. Once that was done, Flum and Sara grabbed their bags and prepared to leave. Milkit would be staying behind for this one, since she’d only be endangering herself if they happened to encounter trouble down in the cave.

She looked quite worried as they said their goodbyes. “Are you sure about this?”

“If we run across anything that looks too dangerous, we’ll come right back.”

“But...”

“Don’t you worry, I’m going too, ya know!”

“That’s right. With the two of us, we should be fine.”

“I...understand.” Milkit nodded, though she looked far from convinced.

“I get your concern, Milkit, but it’s harder to do my job if you can’t send me off with a smile.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say, Master.”

Flum laughed. “Oh, I know, believe me. Anyway, we’re off!”

“See ya!”

The two waved cheerfully and went on their way.

Milkit watched them grow smaller as they vanished into the distance. Her heart raced as she felt a cloud of worry settle over her, but it was a slave's duty to stay behind and patiently await their master.

She finally worked up a smile and waved back to Sara and Flum. "Good luck, Master and Sara!"

Hearing this brought a smile to Flum's lips.

About an hour after leaving town, the road brought Flum and Sara through a dark, foreboding forest before eventually stopping at the mouth of a cave. It was clearly enlarged by manmade tools, probably dating back to the time when the herb harvesting was in full swing. However, just as the elderly shop owner had stated earlier, it looked abandoned of late, judging by the accumulated moss.

Flum took several deep breaths in an attempt to steady her nerves. Even the usually cheerful Sara looked apprehensive, her face tense, as they stood at the ominous cave entrance.

Alas, they couldn't just stand around here all day. After lighting their lanterns, the two stepped through the cave entrance and moved deeper into its depths, careful to not slip on the moss-covered floor.

Sara spoke barely above a whisper, as if worried that some monsters lurking nearby may hear her. "It's a lot brighter than I thought it would be."

"Yeah, definitely. It looks like some light is getting through cracks in the ceiling."

Flum stopped to look at a plant growing in one of the spots illuminated by a faint ray of light. They would probably find the kialahri growing in a similar place. She extinguished her lamp and looked around. The cave looked surprisingly benign, but she figured they'd draw a lot less attention to themselves with their lanterns off.

Sara quickly followed suit, and the two moved deeper into the dimly lit cave, having to squeeze through narrow passages at times, while finding themselves in cavernous rooms at others. Judging by the markings on the walls, these caves

had all been enlarged by the hands of many men.

Suddenly, they heard a growl emerge from deeper in the cave.

“Nnnngroooooaaaawr.”

Flum turned back to Sara and put a finger to her lips. Sara nodded in response and held her breath. Both girls stood still for a moment and listened intently.

That was when they heard it: footsteps of the decidedly non-human variety.

They edged their way forward, careful to not make a sound, until Flum reached a bend in the tunnel. She leaned forward just enough to peek around the corner.

Up ahead, she spied a green-skinned, muscle-bound humanoid creature, standing around three meters tall. It had bright white horns sticking out of its head.

Sara leaned close to whisper in Flum’s ear. “Looks like an ogre, a C-Rank monster.”

From here, its saliva-drenched tusks glistening in the dim light, it looked like the devils you’d read about in children’s fairytales. Flum cast Scan to check its stats.

Ogre

Affinity: Earth

Strength: 608

Magic: 9

Endurance: 623

Agility: 136

Perception: 81

Just as she would have guessed, its abilities were centered in strength and endurance. Without magic attacks to worry about, Flum figured it should be pretty easy to take down an ogre, even if it was a C-Rank. At the very least, it'd be a lot easier than the battle against the anzu and its sudden wind attacks.

Plus, it was two against one this time, and Flum was even stronger since her last big battle. She felt pretty confident about their chances, but they'd need to make sure not to get hit. One strike could do real damage with such a high strength stat. If the ogre hit the right place, the strike could even prove fatal.

"We've got this one." She had already explained the way her stats worked to Sara the night before. Sara had been obviously taken aback by this revelation, but she'd seen the effects for herself back when they were fighting the thieves in the alley. Flum waited until the ogre's back was turned before giving the go ahead. "All right... Go!"

The girls ran out of the shadows and closed in on the beast.

Between Flum's Souleater blade and Sara's mace, the ogre never stood a chance, its muscles and bones collapsing under their heavy blows. Sara threw her whole body into every swing, causing the mace to land even harder than Flum would have ever imagined possible. She was quite terrifying for a ten-year-old.

The ogre howled in agony and thrashed about, which just left more openings for them to strike. Slowly but surely, the monster grew weaker and slower, until

Flum finally ran her sword straight through its heart. When she pulled the blood-drenched blade free, the ogre dropped lifelessly to the ground.

The two worked together to roll the ogre over and chopped off its fangs. They would fetch a handsome price on the open market. Sure, they were here for herbs, but it couldn't hurt to turn a bit of profit while they were at it.

Flum wiped off the fangs and tossed them into her bag before leading the way deeper into the caverns. They heard the cries of various monsters from time to time as they made their way forward, but the cave complex was apparently a lot bigger than either of them had anticipated because they didn't encounter any. Judging by the sounds of their cries, the monsters were still a fair distance away.

Even if they did encounter a monster, though, Flum felt reasonably confident she and Sara could take it down with relative ease.

As they proceeded through the labyrinthine tunnels, they used paint to mark the walls to help them find their way back. The cave also started to get brighter as they went.

"I wonder if we're getting closer to the entrance?"

"I don't feel like we've done a big loop, so maybe there's some other entrance to the cave."

After turning another corner, the two uncovered the source of the light.

"So that's what it was..."

"You know, I was thinking there was no way enough herbs could grow down here to keep a town of that size thriving, but now it all makes sense."

Up ahead of them, the ceiling fell away and sunlight cascaded through the hole in the earth. A small creek bubbled past, feeding a vast array of plant life. Everything was so green that it was easy to forget that they were still technically in a cave.

"It's like an indoor garden."

"If we weren't here on a mission, this sight alone would make it worth the hike."

But they *were* on a mission, and they didn't have time to sit back and enjoy themselves. If this place could support such a riotous variety of grasses and shrubs, then it only made sense that the kialahri should be nearby, too. Flum immediately began walking around, looking for signs of the herb.

However, Sara stayed fixed in place, a look of worry plastered to her face. "I don't know about this...it's all kinda quiet, don'tcha think?"

The air was clean, and the clearing was nice and warm. If plants grew so well here, it stood to reason there'd be animal life, too. This made Flum stop in her tracks, as well. Now that Sara mentioned it, why were there no animals in a place so perfectly suited to life?

The sound of the burbling water and the leaves rustling in the wind started to take on a rather ominous tone.

"But I'm pretty sure we can find the kialahri somewhere around here. We've gotta look."

"I guess, but I don't want to stay too long, 'kay?"

"Right, let's hurry."

The two girls nodded and immediately split up to look for the kialahri amidst all the plant life.

It was only a moment later that the silence was interrupted by a deafening roar. Flum tensed up, spinning in the direction the sound had originated from. The path they had taken to get here was now completely obstructed by collapsing rocks. Two men were briefly visible through the rubble before it filled in, both wearing sinister grins on their faces.

"Wh-what the heck's going on here?!"

"Are you Dein's thugs?! What the hell are you doing, following us all the way out here?!"

Flum's best guess was that these men were part of the same gang who had tried to steal Leitch's bag. They were probably here to avenge the comrades who were now sitting in the church's jail. Even if that were the case, though, it seemed absurd that they would follow them all the way out to Anichidey just to

get their revenge.

Once the rockslide had settled back down, Flum walked over to inspect the stones blocking their way. "It's not impossible, but I think it'll be pretty tough to move something this big by hand."

"If we try to force our way through, we'll probably just make it worse. Maybe we should look for another exit?"

"You're probably right. Sorry for getting you caught up in all this, Sara."

Sara clenched her fist and shook it. "Sorry? What for? It's that jerk Dein who runs the West District adventurers like a crime boss that's to blame here! Once we get outta here, I'm gonna teach him a thing or two!"

Flum was relieved to see the situation hadn't done anything to dampen Sara's spirits. Still, even assuming there was another exit somewhere, it'd take them some time to find it, considering the sheer size of these caverns.

"Why don't we look for the herbs first? Then we can..."

Before Flum could finish her thought, she heard the sound of something rustling around through the underbrush. She quickly turned her gaze toward some bushes.

"What is it?"

"I...I think something just moved. It might be a monster."

Both girls stood frozen, looking intently in the direction the sound had come from. Finally, a massive, green-skinned figure appeared out of a stand of trees.

"Another ogre? No prob!" Sara declared.

However, Flum remained silent.

"...Flum?"

"Hold on."

Something didn't feel right to her. It was definitely an ogre coming toward them, of that much she was sure. However, there was something different about its head from the ogre they'd killed earlier.

Flum lost sight of the creature for a moment as it moved between the trees.

When it came into view again, what she saw defied belief.

“What is that thing?!”

The ogre had no face.

The inside of its head had been carved out, and something was growing in its place; a mishmash of flesh and muscle, with a heart and various organs pulsating and wrenching around the cavity in a clockwise motion. Thick, red blood poured out of the orifice, cascading down the ogre’s neck and down its chest, lending a black hue to its green skin.

“That’s no ogre, right? I mean, it’s the body of an ogre, but...”

“Use Scan!”

Sara was right. Scan was the quickest way to figure out what they were up against.

Flum cast the spell and quickly glanced over the details.

FoUnD

Or? Who...why: you run away?

Muscular, can do: 7 sin

Mag. Ic: Re Re Re Re

Endurance-rance: 9 dea1d fixed, take

Agility: only chance

DIE: 14

FULFILL YOUR DUTY FLUM APRICOT

None of it made any sense, but Flum knew that whatever it was, it was dangerous. She felt as if an icy hand had reached into her chest and seized hold of her heart.

“Wh-what is that thing?! I’ve never seen anything like it!” Sara had also scanned the creature and was equally terrified by what she had seen.

Glitches like this weren’t entirely out of the ordinary when a spell went wrong in the casting, but that was unlikely to be the case for something as simple as Scan. Especially for two people casting it separately.

“Why was your name in the monster’s status??”

“I don’t know!”

The ogre had been milling about in the distance, minding its own business, until they cast Scan on the creature. It immediately turned its neck, as if the mass of torn flesh where its face had been could see them. The round shape extended slightly sideways, into an oval, almost as if it were smiling at them.

It raised a green fist high in the air. Flum could sense that things were about to turn south for them.

“I...I think we’d better run.”

The monster brought its fist down on the ground, hard, and Flum felt the ground begin to deform beneath her.

Chapter 10:

Back to the Home that the World Forgot

AS SOON AS THE OGRE'S FIST connected with the earth, Flum heard a terrible noise that sounded like a zipper being ripped off its track, while the ground heaved beneath her.

Her body shook, and her vision began to blur. Terrified, she looked down to find that the ground beneath her had turned into a series of teeth-shaped rocks that began to spin in a clockwise motion, much like the drilled-out core of the ogre's face. To her horror, she saw that her legs were already being pulverized by the sawing teeth, sending pieces of meat and blood flying everywhere.

"Aa... Wha?!" The sight was so surreal that she didn't immediately comprehend what was happening, even as she watched her own legs being eaten. Finally, the pain caught up to her and Flum began to scream in agony. "Aaaaaaaguh!!!!"

Her ankles, calves, and even thighs were already gone, and the rocks were still grinding. She couldn't move with her legs destroyed, but if she didn't, her whole body would soon be little more than ground beef, with nothing left to regenerate.

Sweat from merely enduring the sheer pain stung at Flum's bloodshot eyes as she reached a hand out in Sara's direction, still screaming in panic.

"Flum!!"

Sara ran toward Flum at full tilt before diving straight into her, using her momentum to knock Flum free of the jaws of doom. Flum mumbled her best approximation of an expression of gratitude to the girl who just saved her life before looking down at what was left of her thighs. They were ragged and tattered, great chunks of flesh missing where the uneven teeth had torn mercilessly into her body.

She began crawling ever-so-slowly away from the spinning jaws, wincing in pain as the open wounds on her legs dragged along the uneven ground.

A loud, lamenting groan rose up from the spinning jaws over the loss of its meal. “Ha...haaaaauugh!”

Flum’s legs had already started to regenerate, but the pain was still blinding. Though blood continued to spill from her gaping wounds to soak the ground, she was still alive, and she knew that she wasn’t at risk of dying. And if she wasn’t going to die, then that meant everything was okay. Everything had to be okay, because she wasn’t going to die.

Flum continued to repeat this mantra over and over to herself, though it did little to help alleviate the pain. It hurt so bad she began to wonder if pain could actually kill you. She heaved a few times, struggling to breathe, before finally throwing up the contents of her stomach and dropping weakly to the ground.

Sara had been told about Flum’s regenerative abilities, but to her eyes, the wounds Flum had suffered were too critical to do anything about. She worried that Flum would bleed out and die if she didn’t act fast, so she ran over as fast as she could and put her hands to the remains of Flum’s leg.

“Heal!”

Light accumulated around Sara’s hands before she willed it to gather around Flum’s legs. Heal, a mid-tier curative spell, was far too weak to do anything about such a massive injury, but Sara figured it would at least be enough to staunch the bleeding.

Instead, she heard a sizzling sound, almost like bacon thrown into a piping hot pan. When she looked down, she saw the mangled parts of Flum’s thighs were starting to melt.

“Nnnngaaaaaaaaauuuuugh!!! Oooooowww!! Waaaugh!”

Flum’s face was tense as she did her best to fight her way through the pain or even to just stay conscious. She clawed at the ground with her bare fingers until her nails began to separate from their beds.

Sara stared on in shock. “What’s going on here?? I cast a healing spell, I know it!”

After a moment’s pause to reflect, she immediately realized what she’d done wrong.

“What’s... Reversal, right? So that means that a curative spell would have the opposite effect and... Oh, I’m so sorry Flum! I never meant to hurt you!”

Flum knew that, of course. She wanted to tell the other girl it was fine, but she was still battling just to stay conscious. Forming words was beyond her at this point. Even when she tried to, all that came out of her mouth were agonizing screams.

She took several deep breaths, in and out, in and out, in an attempt to refocus her mind., It looked like it’d be some time before she was walking again, but she still wanted to somehow comfort her young companion, who appeared on the verge of tears. Mustering up all her strength, she struggled to get the words out.

“It’s...o...ok...aaay!”

“Flum?!”

“Aah...haaaah... Haaa... Rather, you...you should...”

“I should what??”

“G-get out...out of here!!”

“Get...out?”

Sara was too absorbed in the tragedy that had befallen her friend to think of much else. However, the bizarre ogre-like creature was closing in on them. It broke through a clump of bushes and rushed in toward them, the flaps of skin still attached to its face squishing and squelching with every movement.

“G-got it!”

Sara swiftly wrapped her arms under Flum’s and managed to make use of her incredible strength to jerk Flum out of the way, despite their significant height difference. She broke into a run, carrying Flum, to put some distance between them and their pursuer.

Fortunately, the ogre could only run at little more than a jog. It clenched its fist and dropped low to the ground. Sara started looking frantically at the ground around her feet, worried it was about to unleash a repeat of its previous attack.

However, the creature didn't strike the ground this time. Rather, it punched its hand forward, tearing through the air.

"Sara...run!!"

The beast was trying to capture the two girls in a twisting wind vortex that was coming straight at them.

"Nnnngaaaaaaaahh!!" Sara yelled as she sprinted as fast as she could.

The wind only picked up speed, overpowering their senses with its ungodly howl. At the center of the blast was a column of air so dense and powerful that it shredded anything and everything it ran across, including the back of Sara's robe as she dove out of the way.

"Your flank!"

"Another attack?!"

The ogre wasted no time in pounding its fist into the ground. *Bruuuuuuuuu!* Stones erupted from the ground around Sara's feet and began to spin. She dove forward, narrowly avoiding being caught in the meat grinder from before.

The force of her leap took her straight into Flum, knocking them both to the moist, grass-covered ground. "I'm so sorry!!"

"Don't worry about it!"

Fortunately, Flum's legs had already regenerated at this point. She used the momentum of the fall to throw herself back up to her feet and summoned forth the Souleater.

Flum knew in her heart that she would never be able to beat this thing if she faltered. She had to go on the offensive. Hefting her massive black blade in one hand, she took off in a mad dash straight toward the ogre.

Once Sara got back on her feet, she looked over at Flum's desperate charge and immediately realized what she was planning. She pulled her own mace off her back and traced an arc in the air as she moved in to flank the ogre.

The monster turned all of its attention to the rapidly approaching Flum. Just as the strange message in its stats had suggested, it seemed to be focused on her. It clenched its green fist and punched a blast of air at Flum, who

fortunately managed to read its movements and narrowly dodge to the right. *Fwoooooop!* The invisible attack whipped violently past, just barely missing her. Looking closer, she could make out the swirling jets of air surrounding the ogre's fist.

The blast hit a wall of dirt, leaving a clean, round hole where it made impact. If Flum wasn't careful, that could drill straight through her.

That attack had been different from the ogre's previous ones. It had needed a few moments from when it clenched its fist to when it built up enough power to launch its attack, but this one had been instantaneous. On the other hand, its range was severely limited, and it lasted for only a split second.

Flum continued to close in on the creature, well aware of the danger she was in. But considering she couldn't use magic, fighting at range wasn't an option for her. Sara was much the same, with all her combat style focused on her mace. There was essentially no way for them to avoid battling the ogre up close.

The ogre turned back toward Flum and unleashed yet another attack. Luckily, its hulking, lumbering body was relatively easy to read. She continued dodging attacks, moving in closer and closer. By the time she was finally in range, Sara was already at the monster's back.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

The nun leaped high up into the air and swung her massive mace around to gain momentum before cracking it down on her opponent's skull. *Kthunk!* The dull thud of metal on skull reverberated through the air.

Sara used the force of the blow to throw herself back, putting some distance between her and her opponent. She ran her finger down her nose and smiled triumphantly.

"Take that on for size!"

It was a pretty good hit. A normal ogre would have been out of commission. However, this one just turned around slowly, as if only now aware of Sara's presence. Its loosely connected flesh flapped in the breeze, oozing blood with every movement. The blood pumping forth faster was the only obvious sign of

how angry the creature was.

“I guess...ya didn’t really feel that one, huh?”

“Then how about this?!” Hoping that the ogre was just resistant to blunt-force attacks, Flum lunged in. She swung the Souleater parallel to the ground, taking aim right at the ogre’s legs, and...

Thwump!

The blade smacked into flesh with a heavy thud but failed to do any visible damage.

“I’ve never heard of an ogre this resistant to damage before!”

As the monster raised its fist into the air once again, all of Flum’s hopes for an easy victory came crashing down.

“Flum, watch out!!”

She barely managed to hop back in time, leaving a crater where she’d stood only moments before. Flum readjusted her blade, made sure to keep some distance between her and the ogre, and faced her opponent. She had hoped to win by keeping to close quarters combat, but that clearly wasn’t working. Sara’s mace had no effect, and her Souleater didn’t even leave a scratch.

She looked past the ogre and made eye contact with Sara, who nodded.

The girls moved in unison toward the center of the clearing; the ogre immediately gave pursuit, though they were much too fast for it to keep up.

“What’s the big plan?”

“All we can do...is run away!”

Had the path they’d taken to get here not been blocked, they wouldn’t even have this problem right now. The girls kept moving through the verdant clearing, looking through the gaps in the trees until they spotted it—a hole in the cave wall. Judging by its size, it was probably what the ogre had used to enter the clearing in the first place.

“Are we really going in there?” The worry was evident in Sara’s voice. This was tantamount to running head first into a hornets’ nest.

“What choice do we have? There’s nowhere else to run to, anyway.”

If it came down to it, Flum was willing to use herself as a decoy while Sara got away. At the very least, she knew that she could regenerate.

Their decision made, the two broke into a mad dash for the hole in the cave wall. Beyond the opening, they could see the tunnel extend off into the distance. It looked man-made.

Flum glanced over her shoulder and screamed. “How did he...ack!”

Ogres were generally large, unwieldy, creatures that moved at a lumbering pace, and she had figured this one was no exception. However, one quick backward glance proved her wrong. The ogre was sprinting right at them with perfect form, like a trained runner. Their hard-won lead was quickly disappearing.

It was clearly pushing itself beyond its physical means to do this; Flum could hear the sounds of muscles tearing and bones popping as it moved, the blood pouring from its face turning a deep burgundy. However, it showed no signs of pain or any intention to slow down. It was almost like it was being controlled by some completely different entity.

...But now wasn’t the time to think about that.

The tunnels they now entered were narrow, giving them few options to avoid a direct assault. Finally, the girls found themselves at a dead end, or at least what appeared to be a dead end. There was a massive chasm in the ground right where the tunnel ended, but they had no way of knowing how deep it went.

“It’s a dead end!”

“Not quite!”

“You’re not planning to go down that hole, are you?!”

“There’s no way we can face it with our backs up against the wall like this. If we don’t keep going, we’re done for!”

The ogre continued to close in as they debated their options. As far as Flum saw it, if she was going to die, she’d prefer it to be at her own choosing. It was

the same decision she made when she first met Milkit back in the cell.

That memory was the final push she needed. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and slapped her cheeks.

“I’m ready for this.”

With some final words of encouragement, said more to herself than anyone else, she ignored the voice screaming in the back of her mind to stop this insanity and took the fateful step over the ledge.

“Let’s go!”

“G-gotcha! I’m with ya, Flum!”

Sara threw herself over the edge into the darkness right after her.

Up above, they could hear the ogre stop at the edge of the hole, the fleshy remains of its face staring blankly after them.

THWUMP!

After a brief sensation of weightlessness, Flum’s body slammed into something soft. A moment later, she felt Sara slam down next to her.

She quickly got to her feet and looked around. It was dark, but she could still make things out.

“Where are we?”

“It looks like part of the tunnels, but...gyaugh! What’s that smell??”

Flum immediately brought her hand to her face to cover her nose but quickly realized that it was covered in a thick, goopy liquid. She slowly lowered her gaze, and when she saw what had softened their fall, she let out a scream.

“What, what??” Sara looked concerned, but Flum couldn’t bring herself to tell her what it was. Instead, she pulled Sara’s face into her chest.

“Nngah, what’re you doin’??”

“Listen, Sara, just close your eyes.”

“Hrmph?”

“Just listen to me, okay? Whatever you do, don’t open your eyes until I say so.”

Sara finally nodded against her chest. Flum began to move down the squishy mound with the younger girl clutched closely to her. Her face contorted with each uneven step.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

She continued to murmur to herself as she slowly picked her way through the pile of bones, rotten flesh, and the remnants of what had once been human faces.

No matter where she looked, all she saw was carnage. They were standing atop a literal mountain of corpses. The majority of them were human, though Flum saw some monsters in the mix. Most of the bodies were twisted and contorted in bizarre ways.

The walls of the cavern were primarily a dull grey, marked in places by a familiar corkscrew pattern. It brought to mind the face of the ogre they just escaped from.

“What the hell is this place...?”

She’d pulled Sara in close to shield her from the dead bodies until they escaped the room, but now she wasn’t sure whatever lay outside would be any different. Questions continued to race through Flum’s mind as they approached the exit to the chamber, which was marked by a door that hung ajar. Thankfully, there were no corkscrew markings on it.

She peeked through the gap in the door. There were no monsters as far as she could see, nor any more dead bodies.

With a sigh of relief, Flum stepped out of the room and quickly closed the door behind her before finally letting go of Sara.

“Can I open my eyes?”

“Yeah, it should be all right now.”

Sara opened her eyes and glanced around the room.

“Huh, it’s pretty dark in here.” She walked over to the wall and grabbed a

crystalline object affixed to it. “Think it’s okay to get a little light?”

Though they looked different from the ones in the capital, it was clear this was the switch for operating the magical lamps in the tunnel. All you needed to do was concentrate and apply a little magic to turn it on.

Flum nodded and Sara focused her energies on the object. A moment later, lamps embedded in the ceiling of the tunnel blinked on one after another. Once their eyes adjusted and they got a good look at their surroundings, the two were left in awe at the sprawling complex that stretched before them.

“This is...amazing.”

“It looks...futuristic.”

Flum reached out and touched the grey wall, as if to make sure it were real. It was cool to the touch and felt like some sort of metal. Since they had fallen down a pit to get here, that meant they were even deeper underground than before. She could only imagine the sheer technical skill needed to build and excavate such a massive installation underground, to say nothing of the money involved.

“Let’s look for a way outta here.”

“Yeah. Fascinating as this is, I think our lives are worth more.”

The two moved deeper and deeper into the complex until they came to a fork in the tunnel. First, they went left, only to find that led to a dead end. They backtracked to the fork and went right, which continued on for quite a way. The further they went, the darker it got. Flum figured they needed to find another light switch.

Unlike the left-hand path, this tunnel led to a door. Flum put her ear to it and listened closely but heard no sounds of movement. Holding the Souleater up in one hand, she slowly pushed the door open before running her hand blindly along the wall next to it.

She felt the familiar sensation of a crystal object.

Since her stats had always been zero, Flum never had the chance to actually use one of these things before, but she figured that it must be similar to how

she used Scan for the first time. Mustering up her courage, she closed her eyes and let the magic energy flow from her hand into the crystal.

After a moment, the lamps in the room turned on, much to Flum's relief. She spotted a wooden desk, a cabinet, and two bookshelves, plus a sofa and table that seemed to be set aside for receiving guests. The room was a fair bit smaller than the corpse-filled one they just left behind, but more than adequate for a single person's use. The furniture looked expensive and well made, suggesting the room had been meant for an important person.

"All the shelves are empty."

"Yeah..."

While Sara was searching the shelves for a map, Flum was busily staring at the walls. The familiar corkscrew pattern pockmarked the walls throughout the room, ranging in size from small to large. She ran her fingers across the metal and felt that the dent ran quite deep. Whatever made it had to be pretty powerful to deform metal like that.

Sara walked over to Flum's side. "What're you lookin' at, Flum?"

"I don't know, but I saw something similar back in the room we landed in."

"Look, it's rotating."

"The ogre that attacked us back there had something similar on its face."

"That's right. Ugh, gross..."

This spinning thing seemed to latch onto walls, humans, and even monsters. So, was this facility built to handle those things?

Flum shook her head. She needed to focus on getting out right now. She moved over to the desk and began to search it in the hopes of finding something useful, but one of the drawers seemed to be stuck.

"Stuck?"

"Yeah, I think it's locked."

"Can't we just break it? I mean, there's no one here."

Sara was right; they were in a dire situation. Flum pulled out the Souleater

and stabbed the tip of the blade into the lock, shattering it and the surrounding wood. The drawer then easily slid open.

Inside, she found an old, faded notebook. Flum picked it up, and Sara jogged over to her side to see what she'd found.

It looked like some kind of journal.

"It's been about two days since we lost control of it, and we've finally heard back from management telling us to destroy everything. I asked when we'd be rescued, but there was no reply. I can't help but wonder if that 'everything' includes us, too."

Though there were no dates, judging by the condition of the paper, Flum guessed the entry was around ten years old.

The entries continued, growing darker as they went.

"Succession by heredity is a pointless system. I never wanted to be here. I wish I could have slowly worked my way up the ladder and gained recognition, but here I am. We've managed to confine all the test subjects, but the energy seeping forth has started to have strange effects on its surroundings, even resulting in some casualties. We don't have much time left."

Test subjects? Flum wondered if that was referring to the mountain of bodies they found.

"So they were doing some kind of experiments here, and the ogre was probably one of them."

"Some sort of man-made abomination. It sounds like they lost control?"

The writing seemed to grow even more frantic. It hadn't been neat to begin with, but now the author's hand was moving erratically across the page.

"For god or for country, what is the point of this? I don't care anymore. I only signed up out of a desire to do what was right. Are countries not the creation of man? And by extension, am I not a part of this country?"

"I don't know what they're thinking anymore. I did what was expected of me, but perhaps I wasn't thorough enough. Perhaps I failed to make the right connections. I'll be the first to admit that my knowledge was limited and that I

failed to establish meaningful relationships. Is this all my fault? I don't think so. I did what was right, dammit!

"I am me. Me. Myself. Around and around we go... No...we do not. Me, I, right. Always. But what is right? Yes, it's all connected. We're all connected. This circular knowledge leads to wisdom. So that is what is right. Right?"

The author was now writing in large letters, filling entire pages with only a few words. It was quickly becoming clear that they were losing their mind.

"Circular wisdom... Connections?"

"I don't get it, either. Maybe it has something to do with the energy they said was seeping forth?"

"Agreed."

The next pages were even harder to read. Flum had to run her finger across the letters to try and understand them, and even then, they hardly made sense.

"I want to be connected, to be one. That is the way to enlightenment. We... Yes... That is what we have always been aiming for, have always sought...have always believed. Now that we've attained what we had so desperately sought, I wonder why I fixate on these small things that matter not?"

The researchers are all connected. Finally, it's my turn. But to where? Will I die? I don't know. Wisdom is found in a plane of existence beyond the mortal realm, and I must go. But...what if it's not safe there? Before true wisdom can be attained, peace, order, and control must be preserved."

Only one thing was written on the final page, the words spiraling in a corkscrew fashion.

"Flum Apricot"

The two girls stood there for a moment, speechless. Flum's hands began to shake and the paper began to crumple up in her grip.

"That again...?"

"Flum...?"

"This journal, it's pretty old, Sara. And yet my name...the name of some

unimportant girl from a tiny little village... Why is my name in this notebook?? I don't get it!!"

Her anger and fear all came together in one confused outburst. Flum threw the notebook to the floor and began breathing heavily, her shoulders heaving up and down.

"All I ever wanted was to live a simple, ordinary life back in my hometown. I know that's not possible anymore, but after meeting Milkit, I thought we could at least live together in peace in the capital. But this... What the hell is all this? Why is my name here, in a place that I just happened to end up in by nothing more than happenstance?!"

"I'm...I'm so sorry." It was, after all, Sara who had led Flum here in the first place. She clenched her fists tight, trying to fight back the tears that blurred the edge of her vision.

Hearing Sara's sobs brought Flum back to reality. Though it did little to ease the fear that clutched tightly at her heart, she knew that it wouldn't be right to take her anger out on the other girl.

She knelt before Sara and looked her in the eye as she gently stroked the young nun's hair. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to blame you."

"No, it's all my fault. If I hadn't found the information about this cave in the first place, then you would never have ended up here."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Sara. If it weren't for you, I never would have learned about where to find the kialahri."

"Oh, Flum..." Sara could no longer hold back her tears. "I'm so sorry, Flum. You've got so much to be afraid of, and here I am, seeking comfort from you. I should be comforting *you*, not the other way around."

"Don't worry about it. Besides, you helped me get myself under control."

Pulling herself together to be strong for Sara had allowed some of the fear racing through Flum's mind to subside. In that way, she was actually thankful to have Sara along.

Flum wiped the tears from Sara's cheeks and looked around. "I don't see any

maps in here, so I guess we better start checking some other rooms, yeah?”

The younger girl smiled back at her and gave a firm nod.

Despite their best efforts, they failed to find either a map or anything that appeared to be an exit. The facility was vast, and the further they explored, the more indentations they observed in the walls. They even found entire hallways that were twisted.

“This place is really bizarre.”

“Whoever built it must have thrown a lot of money at the research being conducted here.”

“If they could actually harness this kind of power, it would be an unstoppable weapon.”

“Even the demons wouldn’t stand a chance against it.”

The sheer size of the facility, the technology that had gone into its creation, and the fact that it was all built underground made it pretty likely that the government was involved. Probably with some aid from the church, considering they had gotten rid of all the medicine makers to fill their own coffers. Everyone knew they were corrupt, but to think they’d go so far as to experiment on people...

Flum bit down on her lip, trying to fight back the rising anger she felt.

As they continued down the unending, nondescript grey hallways, she heard an unfamiliar sound. It was quiet but stood out starkly in the silence.

Flum and Sara both stopped instantly to listen.

“Was that...a voice?”

“Maybe someone’s still alive!”

Flum reached out to stop Sara before she could take off running. They didn’t know for sure that it was a person. It could easily be a monster.

They began moving forward again, taking slow, measured steps.

“...lp...meeee...! Some...oooooone...!”

The voice grew clearer as they moved. It was a woman calling out for help.

“Aaaah... Heeeelp me! Please, someone, heeeeeelp meeeeeee!”

At the other end of the hallway, they finally spotted a woman with long, white hair, clad in a lab coat. She was sitting at a turn in the hallway with her back up against the wall and her knees held tightly against her chest, which partially explained why her voice was so muffled. Though Flum couldn't help but wonder why she was covering her face if she needed help...

Just to be on the safe side, she had Sara hang back while she approached the woman alone.

“Aaaah... Heeeelp me! Please, someone, heeeeeelp meeeeeee!” The woman continued repeating the same thing, over and over, even once Flum was standing right in front of her. She had to have heard her coming, though Flum supposed it was possible the woman thought she was a monster. Or maybe she just wasn't of sound mind anymore.

At any rate, she'd clearly been through some kind of ordeal. Flum put a hand on the woman's shoulder to try and comfort her. Her cries stopped the instant Flum touched her, and Flum relaxed for a moment, comforted that the woman finally seemed to be calming down and acknowledging her presence.

“Are you okay, ma'am? Please don't worry, I'm human.”

The woman slowly turned to face her. Except that wasn't the right word, as the woman had no face. There was just a pulsating mass of meat and blood where her face should have been. Her long bangs were drenched with blood and stuck to the wet mass in the center of her face, as was the front of her lab coat, which she had been holding tightly against her knees.

Some of the blood gurgling from the woman's face splattered onto Flum's cheek. It felt warm to the touch. What was left of her mouth turned up into a smile. Her voice sounded muffled as she spoke.

“I foooooound you.”

She grabbed Flum's arm tight with both hands and leaned in close.

The bizarre pulsating spiral in her face spun even more violently as it took in

Flum's arm, gauntlet and all. Flum froze for a moment at the bizarre sensation of being enveloped by the warm, fleshy organs before the sheer terror of what she was experiencing caught up with her.

“Aaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

Much to her surprise, she couldn't yank her arm free even with the enhancements from her cursed equipment. The woman was simply too strong. Much stronger than any normal human. And things were about to get worse. Flum realized that the sound of pounding footsteps, which she'd initially assumed was Sara coming to her aid, was coming from around the corner and closing in fast.

The new arrival screeched to a stop just out of sight, before sticking its head around the corner to peer at Flum. Thick, dark blood oozed from its drilled-out face and stained its muscled green body.

“Aa...aaaaaaah.”

It was the ogre that Flum thought they had escaped from. These hallways were human-sized; there was no way it should have been able to fit...unless it had been crawling on all fours the whole time.

“N-nooooooooo!! Eaaaaugh!!”

Flum twisted her head from side to side in a vain attempt to get away from the slowly approaching beast. It was rapidly becoming clear that the woman's screams had just been bait, to lure her or some other kind soul into a trap while the ogre lay in wait.

“Letmego, let me go! Let! Me! Go!!!”

“Fluuuum!!”

Chapter 11:

Our Time Was Not Wasted

THOUGH SHE PULLED with all her strength, Flum couldn't get away from the woman, who'd now sucked her arm in up to the elbow. If the ogre hit her at such close range, she'd be dead for sure.

She looked up to see the ogre slowly raising its fist. There was only one option left to her.

"Sara, cast a healing spell on my arm!"

"What?? But that'll..."

"Just hurry up and do it!"

Sara hadn't studied magic to cause harm to people, that much Flum knew. But right now, it was what had to be done to save her life.

Pushing aside her reservations, Sara rubbed her hands together. Heal wouldn't be powerful enough to completely destroy Flum's arm, so she had to use a more powerful spell.

"Recover!"

Light flew from Sara's palms and swirled around Flum's arm before entering her skin. Her arm began to melt from the inside out.

"Aaaaaaaaugh!!!"

The pain that tore through her was excruciating, far worse than what she had expected. Every pore felt like it was on fire, sweat drenched her entire body, and she struggled to breathe. It felt as if her bones had been replaced with red-hot iron bars.

As her arm start to slough away into thick, fleshy sludge, Flum yanked it free of the woman's face and tumbled backward onto the cold floor. *THWUNK!* She watched as the ogre's fist swung through the space where her head had been just moments ago, before connecting with the faceless woman instead and

reducing her to chunks of meat.

Still wracked with pain and losing massive amounts of blood, Flum heard her gauntlet clang to the floor. She felt as if she might pass out at any moment but clenched her jaw in an attempt to refocus herself and started crawling away from the ogre.

“Fluuuum!”” Sara extended a hand out to her.

“Haah...haaaah...hah...nng. We’ve gotta get outta here!” Flum took her hand and yanked herself up to her feet. She quickly grabbed her gauntlet before they took off at a run.

The ogre stopped crawling on all fours for a moment to watch the two fleeing girls. Flum risked a backward glance to see why it wasn’t following them, only to catch it begin to move. *Thud thud thud thud thud!* Her face tensed up at the sight of the ogre moving toward them like a large spider.

Fortunately, it crawled a lot slower than it could run. Now that Flum’s arm was healing and the pain slowly fading, she was able to pick up the pace. By turning as many corners as possible, the girls slowly put some distance between them and their pursuer.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Flum??”

“I’m, well, I’m not exactly okay. But...I mean, I think I’m fine.”

Losing a limb was a horrifying experience for anyone, let alone a sixteen-year-old girl. The pain didn’t just impact Flum’s body, but her mind, making it hard for her to focus on the task at hand. However, before it could overwhelm her, the image of Milkit waiting for her back in Anichidey came to mind. She couldn’t just die like this. She had to return to Milkit.

As her resolve recovered, so did her strength. Flum pushed herself even harder as the two continued their frantic attempt to escape the facility. They wove their way through the complex mess of hallways, taking nearly every turn they could in order to put more distance between them and the ogre. After doing this for a while, they seemed to have finally lost their pursuer.

“Think we gave ’im the slip?” Sara skidded to a stop and looked around nervously.

“Maybe, but I don’t think we should relax just yet. We still don’t know how to get out of here.”

“You’re right. And...hey, listen. I hear a lot of voices.”

Flum listened closely.

“Heeelp meeee!”

“It hurts, please... It hurts!”

“Someone please help me! It hurts so bad!”

The voices were coming from practically every direction. Just the sound of them was terrifying. Flum figured that they were trying to pull the same trick as the woman earlier, luring them into a trap.

The faceless ogre hadn’t just been strong but also smarter than a normal ogre should have been. Could that be because of whatever had drilled into its face?

“So what do we do? I don’t even know how we’re supposed to get out of here...”

Finding an exit in this labyrinth was hard enough as it was. Finding an exit while trying to evade monsters was well-nigh impossible. Even if they did find one, their problems wouldn’t be at an end; the ogre might leave the caves to chase after them, possibly putting the nearby villagers at risk.

“We’ve gotta find some way to kill that ogre.” True as that might be, neither Sara’s mace nor Flum’s own sword had had much impact on it. “What about your magic, Sara?”

“I’m not too good at offensive magic, y’know. All my strongest attacks involve my mace. What about you?”

“Pretty much stuck with my sword. I’m not a magic user.”

“Then we gotta find something that’ll help us put the hurt on that thing! There’s gotta be gear of some sort around here.”

“Hey, wait a second. Isn’t there a light magic spell that boosts your stats?”

Sara hung her head. “I dunno that spell, sorry.”

“No worries. That just means that we need to think of something else.

Hmm...”

Flum put her hand to her chin in thought. Unfortunately, they didn’t get much time to think about it, as the sound of thundering footsteps reached their ears. This time, they were coming from up ahead.

“He’s back!!”

The ogre stuck its head around the corner and stared at them, blood spurting from the churning organ in its face and staining the floor. Flum took a step back. The creature reached a large, green arm around the corner and pulled itself forward along the wall. Sara took a step back as well, prompting the ogre to reach out with its other arm and pull its blood-stained torso forward.

As soon as the two girls turned to flee, the ogre gave chase again, this time crawling along the wall.

“How did it get in front of us?!”

“It’s gotta know the facility like the back of its hand by now!”

“I’ve never seen an ogre this smart!”

“Was it this fast before??”

Sara was right—the ogre was moving a lot faster than it had been during their last encounter. Despite them taking every turn they could, it was keeping up, and every time they stumbled, it managed to get just a little closer.

“He’s probably clinging to the wall to avoid all the obstacles.”

“This thing’s way too smart for its own good!”

Despite their best efforts, the ogre was closing in fast. They had to do something to defend themselves. If only there was something Flum could do to make her sword more powerful...

Just then, Gadhio’s words came back to her.

“There comes a time for every adventurer when they must fight an opponent many times stronger than them. There’s a certain technique you can use to push past your own limitations in such a scenario.”

Even though she couldn’t use it then, Gadhio had still taken the time to

demonstrate this sword technique to Flum.

“The Cavalier Arts...”

“What’re you talkin’ about??” Sara looked back in confusion.

Even though Gadhio had taught her the technique, Flum had been unable to use it for a very simple reason: the Cavalier Arts turned the user’s endurance stat into something known as *prana*, which in turn boosted their strength. Since her stats were all zero, the technique did nothing for her.

But now...now, things were different. This would be her last stand. If this failed, she’d die here. But if she didn’t even try, she’d die anyway.

“If this works out, then I might just be able to inflict some damage.”

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but I guess this means you have a plan?”

“It’s all or nothing, but it’s the best we’ve got.”

“Do you need some time to prep?”

If she said yes, would Sara take it on herself to keep Flum safe in the mean time? Could she leave such a young girl to face this massive beast all on her own?

“I’ll...need a little time to get ready, yeah.” Flum hesitated, but ultimately decided to trust the task to Sara’s capable hands. It was a bad situation all the way around, but what choice did they really have?

“All right then, just leave it to me!” Sara skidded to a halt and turned around, pulling her mace up and at the ready.

The ogre immediately stopped at the sight of its prey giving up the chase. The vortex in the middle of its face contorted in a sick imitation of a smile, as if already celebrating its upcoming kill. Blood dripped like saliva from a dog’s mouth.

Sara stood at the ready. This was her one and only chance, so it had to be good.

Flum stood a short distance behind her and summoned forth the Souleater.

Holding the sword in both hands, she lowered it to just below waist level and closed her eyes in concentration.

“Aw’right, I’ll be right back, ’kay? Heck, I might even just kill that ogre myself!” Sara was hyped up and raring to go.

The ogre suddenly lunged forward on all fours toward Sara, swinging out its arm in an attempt to knock aside the girl obstructing its path. The young nun dove high up into the air, flipping over her opponent, and smashed her mace against the back of the ogre’s skull.

THWACK!

Had this been a normal ogre, the blow would have shattered its cranium and sent it spiraling to the ground.

“There’s more where that came from!” Sara cried.

The ogre anticipated where she would land and swung at her, though she quickly ducked out of the way. It grabbed for her with its other arm, but she managed to dive up the wall and escape.

Meanwhile, Gadhio’s words resonated in Flum’s mind.

“Think of it as if it were magic. Draw all of the magic out of your body and into your fist, and then turn that into strength. The only thing that makes this technique different from normal magic is that it is far more challenging to focus on your endurance.”

Her eyes still closed, Flum imagined her endurance as if it were akin to blood, flowing freely through her body. She reached deep within herself and tried to grab that flowing power, but it spilled like water through your fingers.

“It’s more malleable than magic, harder to get a handle on. Your mind must be pure and completely at ease, much like how a still lake acts as a mirror.”

She tried to block out her surroundings and dig even deeper. Slowly, the sounds of the battle around her began to fade away, and even her own thoughts grew distant.

In this moment of inner peace, Flum was completely at ease. Her mind was a crystal-clear pond, with nary a ripple to disturb its perfect surface.

“Aunnng!!”

Sara blocked the ogre’s fist with her mace, but the blow was still powerful enough to knock her into the wall behind her. The air was knocked from her lungs, and she felt a searing pain run up her back. She immediately cast a healing spell on herself to cure any bones broken in the impact.

The ogre took advantage of this opening and followed up with another blow. *SMASH!* Its fist hit the wall where she stood mere moments ago, the metal deforming as if it were mere clay. It was only thanks to Sara’s quick reflexes that she was able to dive out of the way in time.

She was giving this absolutely everything she had, and the ogre was just whaling on her with no restraint or strategy. The sheer power gap between them was painfully apparent, and Sara knew that she couldn’t keep this up forever.

“Hey, uh, Flum... How’s it goin’? I still got this for now, don’tcha worry!”

Meanwhile, Flum was slowly but surely starting to get the hang of it. She extended her hand and opened up her palm, allowing that untouchable, invisible energy to run through her fingers as she tried to get a sense for it.

And then, finally—she caught it. Only a sliver of it. She didn’t rejoice. If she lost her focus now, then it would all be for nothing.

It was time to move to the next step.

“Once you’ve managed to grasp the power, the hard part’s over. Next, turn that energy into strength and transfer it to your blade.”

Unlike most magic, which required the caster to clearly visualize their intent, it was relatively easy to mold the energy of prana once you had a grasp of it. Flum focused on the prana gripped in her imaginary hand, and transferred it from just below her heart to her shoulders, down her arms, and into the palms of her hands. From there, she transferred this pure, translucent energy into the Souleater.

“Assuming the prana is completely pure and unsullied, then...”

She’d done her best to follow Gadhio’s instructions, though she had no way of

judging exactly how well it had worked. But her sword was now imbued with a powerful energy—she could tell that much.

“Hey, Fluuuum?!”

The ogre was standing directly above Sara, about to deliver a death blow. Even with nowhere left to escape, the nun didn’t cry out for help. But the fear was readily apparent in her voice.

It was now Flum’s turn to prove to Sara that her faith was not misplaced. She owed a lot to this young girl.

She ran as fast as she could toward the towering ogre as Gadhio’s final instructions echoed through her mind.

“...Then you release all of your power in one mighty strike.”

She put all of the prana energy into her swing and aimed for its neck. This was the power of the Cavalier Arts.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

This attack was known as Shaker Imitation.

Swoompf!

Her sword was a shimmering blade of flame. The prana-empowered Souleater did the impossible: it slashed through the ogre’s skin, straight through its muscles, and embedded itself deep in its spinal cord.

The ogre’s head rocked back and forth as the vortex spinning in the middle of its face picked up speed, sending blood splattering everywhere. It was clearly in pain.

“You did it! Now leave the rest up to me!”

“He’s all yours, Sara!” Flum let go of the handle and stepped back as Sara hefted her mace, dove high up into the air, and slammed down hard on the part of the blade still sticking out of its neck.

The blow gave the sword the extra kick it needed to completely sever the ogre’s neck, sending its head dropping to the ground with a wet thud. The spitting organ in its face immediately stopped moving and the unsettling

churning noise ceased. They'd done it.

Sara laughed nervously. "Th-that was pretty hairy back there for a second, huh?"

Flum's whole body heaved as she caught her breath. "I just hope cutting its head off actually killed the thing..."

She wasn't nearly as certain of their victory as Sara was. Sure, she hoped it was dead, but there was something alarming about how its body still maintained its posture, propped up in a crawling position. Almost every animal she knew of died once decapitated, but there was nothing normal about this thing.

...And then her worst fears were confirmed.

"Sara, run!!"

"Wha? Why?? We just killed it, and... Huh?"

The open wound at its neck had begun to move and transform into a familiar shape.

"N-no way! Is it spinning??"

A new vortex appeared in the stump of the ogre's neck, once again spinning and sputtering blood, as if to announce that it would be serving as the abomination's new head. Its whole upper body shuddered before the ogre began to move again toward Sara, who was too stunned to move.

"Watch out!!" Flum dove into Sara and wrapped her arms around the younger girl, shielding her from the impact with the floor.

"Th-thanks."

"Let's get out of here!"

The two girls scrambled back to their feet and immediately took off running again.

Just as Flum had feared, this was no normal living creature, and it was hellbent on killing them. Running was the best option left.

Fortunately, the ogre didn't seem to be accustomed to functioning without its

head. Its movements were jerky, allowing the girls to get a fair lead on their pursuer. But unless they found the exit sometime soon, their predicament hadn't really changed. It was just a matter of time until the ogre found and killed them.

They needed to kill this thing once and for all.

Flum could stop again, refocus herself, and let loose with another prana attack, aiming for a vital organ this time. But even then, she couldn't be sure it would kill this thing...

The girls continued to sprint through the facility, turning at every corner they came across, until they could no longer hear the ogre following them.

Flum and Sara stopped and leaned up against the wall to catch their breath.

"I d-don't get it. We cut its head off, didn't we? There was so much blood...!"

"Maybe it's... Maybe it's like me?"

"But that's because of a curse, right?" Sara meant there had to be some other power that was keeping the ogre's body moving.

"If only we knew what its weakness was..."

Flum slowed down her breathing and let her mind run over the possibilities. She knew, deep down, that the answer lay within her Reversal affinity.

Increasing stats was no easy task, but maybe there was some way to lower them instead?

"Mind if I try something else out, Sara?"

"I got nothin', so I'm game for whatever you've got! I trust your judgment."

"Don't put too much faith in me. Anyway, I want to head back to the first room we landed in."

"The one where you told me not to look?"

"Right. I really didn't want to show you, but we're running out of options here."

The two retraced their steps, being sure to avoid any dead bodies that might be booby-trapped, and headed back to the room they had originally plummeted

into, all the while hearing the cries of the dead echoing from every direction.

Suddenly, they heard the rapid thumping of the ogre moving through the halls. The girls froze at once. Flum's heart was beating so hard she worried it would burst right out of her chest. Sara didn't seem to be faring much better, judging by her ragged breathing and sweat-drenched forehead.

They stood deathly still until, fortunately, the sounds grew more and more distant and eventually faded from hearing.

The two girls let out a sigh of relief and continued moving again. Flum felt certain that the only reason why it hadn't found them was due to the loss of its head. With many of its vital senses gone, the ogre couldn't pursue them with quite the same tenacity as before. At least that meant she'd done some real damage with her last attack.

When they finally made it back to the corpse-filled room, Flum told Sara to keep her eyes pointed upward as much as possible before opening the door. The reek of rotting flesh assaulted them, causing Flum to scowl and Sara to bring her hand to her mouth.

Flum led the way into the room and activated the switch embedded in the wall, illuminating the tragic scene in all its gory wonder.

Sara gagged and heaved audibly as she struggled to speak.

"Are...are these... Were these... Are they all dead?"

The mountain of corpses sported bodies in all states of decomposition, from bleached bones to rotting flesh, with a few mummified husks thrown in as well.

"I'm sorry, I really didn't want you to see this."

"N-no, don't worry. I...I'm used to seeing this stuff."

Part of the church's duties, after all, was to tend to the sick and injured. Even someone as young as Sara had probably already seen more than her share of bodies. But this...this was beyond the pale.

They had no time to just stand around. Not when the ogre could show up any minute. Flum ran over toward the mountain of bodies and, after a moment's hesitation, grabbed one and dragged it free to check its clothes, shoes, and

accessories.

“What’re you doing?”

“Looting corpses.”

“Looting...corpses? But why?”

“Listen, I don’t like it either, okay? But with all these bodies here, there just might be some equipment that’s been imprinted with a powerful curse.”

“And you plan on using that??”

It was the only way she could think of to make herself immediately strong. If she collected enough cursed equipment, and boosted her stats enough, she could get off an even more powerful Cavalier Arts attack. That just might do the trick.

“Nnng, this is so nasty...”

Blood, rotten flesh, flayed muscle, and shredded organs stuck wetly to Flum’s hands. She yanked a body out of the way, sending something wet and slimy splattering across her cheek. With a shudder, she wiped it away with her wrist and moved on. The bodies were absolutely crawling with insects, which she had to frequently shake off her hands.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes at the gruesome work, but she pushed herself on. Flum fixated on her goal of living long enough to escape from this hell, fought back her growing desire to cry and run away, and scanned every item she came across.

Suddenly, Sara sat down next to her.

“Sara, hang back and wait for me.”

“I’m...I’m gonna search, too.”

She absolutely was not about to let a ten-year-old girl take on such a gruesome task. “No, I’ve got this.”

“We’ve gotta do this to survive. *Both* of us. I’m not just gonna let you do all the work.” Sara scrunched up her face and clenched her jaw as she reached hesitantly toward a body.

“Thank you, Sara...and please forgive me. I’ve asked so much of you today.”

“You’ve done a ton for me too, Flum.”

“Once we get out of here, let’s go get a nice dinner, huh?”

“I’ll hold ya to it. Personally, I’d like to have some of Milkit’s home cooking.”

“That’d be nice. Let’s do it.”

“Deal.”

Flum had no idea if she could even make good on that promise, but it helped keep things light. She scanned anything and everything she could but just couldn’t find the cursed items she’d hoped for. Maybe all the curses had become concentrated in just one item—or at least, that’s what she told herself.

“He’s here...”

They could hear approaching footsteps. The fact that the creature was even moving through nearby hallways was proof enough that it had somehow followed their trail, and here they were, in a figurative and literal dead end.

They didn’t have much time left.

Deciding this would be their last try, Flum and Sara tugged together on the body of a woman stuck deep in the pile. Despite her advanced state of decomposition, the items she wore on her body were all in pristine condition. Flum started from the top and scanned her way down: necklace, ring, bodice, skirt, and finally her boots.

Name: God Hater Leather Boots

Tier: Epic

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Strength by 257]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Magic by 330]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Endurance by 885]

[This equipment lowers its wearer’s Agility by 731]

[This equipment freezes its wearer’s body]

As soon as Flum saw those stats, she immediately yanked the boots off the woman and put them on herself. They were clammy and sticky; an overall disgusting sensation.

But she could feel power well up in her, and she didn't seem to be freezing—or burning, for that matter. Since her Reversal affinity seemed to turn everything on its head, she couldn't help but wonder how “this equipment freezes its wearer's body” would manifest.

“We found one!” Sara cried.

“It's all thanks to your help, Sara. I don't know what difference this will make, but we've gotta try.”

Flum's total stats were now at 3,396, with her strength and agility both exceeding over 500. Her endurance had gone past the 1,000 mark. She felt her fear ebb away and her breathing settle down.

“Thank you, Sara. Truly, thank you.”

“Bit early for thanks! We still gotta nuke that thing.”

The ogre stuck its neck into the room. Its shoulders were too wide for the doorway, temporarily pinning it in place; the swirling organ on its severed neck twisted and wrenched around, almost as if it were inspecting the room, before coming to a halt pointed in Flum and Sara's direction.

The two girls tensed up.

Green fingers slowly came into view and latched onto the doorframe. One powerful tug and the metal gave way with a terrible screech. The veins on the backs of the creature's hands bulged as it pulled even harder. When the doorway was finally large enough, the ogre forced its right arm in. Its powerful fingers dug deep into the floor as it dragged its whole body forward, literally sliding into the room.

Now free of the doorway, the creature stood up and punched the air straight in Flum's direction. The resulting blast of wind drilled a hole in the mountain of bodies, covering Flum and Sara with flecks and shreds of what had once been

human.

The ogre remained fixated on its target: Flum. But her new equipment had made her an entirely different force to reckon with.

When the creature launched its next strike, Flum deftly dodged out of the way and swung up with the Souleater, slashing its arm as it flew past. A red line appeared on the green flesh, confirming that her strength had increased.

The injury was minor, of course, but it meant she was now in a position to fight back.

She dashed forward, circling around her enemy, and concentrated all of her newly enhanced strength into another powerful slash. This, too, inflicted only a thin cut on the ogre's body. Much to her surprise, however, the blow was immediately followed by a crackling sound and the formation of ice crystals around the edges of the wound.

Bjooo, bjooooop! Blood sputtered out of the ogre's neck as it jerked around in a desperate attempt to figure out the strange sensation of its wound freezing up. It lunged in to grapple Flum, but she had already ducked between its legs and was once again behind her opponent.

Flum let out a slow breath and began to let the energy flow from her body, down through her arms, and into her sword. She leapt up into the air and swung down with her blade as she unleashed another prana-powered Shaker Imitation.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaauuuh!!"

Zwooosh!

The attack was much more powerful than before and cleaved straight through the ogre's right arm with little resistance. The creature howled in pain, but the stump of its arm began to spin and contort within moments, halting any further blood loss.

"Yeah!!" Sara cheered from the sidelines.

The ogre spun around and threw another powerful punch at Flum, who dove backward just in time to narrowly dodge. Sara lunged in to take a swipe at the

creature's now-exposed back.

"It's my turn!"

CRACK! Her mace shattered the ice, leaving cracks in the ogre's frozen flesh as it fell away. The freezing effect had given her the chance to deal damage her mace had previously been unable to.

The green giant stumbled forward toward Flum, its right leg shattering on impact. Sara swung again, landing a blow in the exact same spot her mace had struck last time, while Flum used another prana-empowered slash to lop off the ogre's left leg.

Bjooooop! The ogre writhed in pain as blood sprayed from the stump of its neck like a fountain. The tides of battle had finally turned in their favor.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" With one final, powerful swing, Flum used another Shaker Imitation strike to chop off the ogre's last remaining arm. Divested of all limbs and even its head, the creature's torso squirmed on the ground like a blind insect. All its wounds had been replaced with the bizarre, spiraling vortexes, though it couldn't move anymore.

"That thing's still alive?!"

"It certainly seems that way. But I have no idea how we'd even kill it at this point. Let's just get out of here."

"Yeah, you're right. No point in bangin' our heads against a wall."

"Besides, I'm beat."

The two exchanged a wry smile. Sara was drenched in sweat, and her shoulders heaved as she sucked in oxygen. Flum wasn't much better off, her mental and physical resources thoroughly depleted.

Though they had healthy reservations about leaving the squirming mass of muscle behind, the girls slowly made their way to the torn-open doorway. Flum stepped through and stopped.

"Hey, Sara?"

"Yeah?"

“Do you feel that? It feels like...wind.”

It felt like a gentle breeze was caressing her cheek. She was certain she hadn't felt it last time they were through here.

“Are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?” Sara seemed to agree, so it wasn't just Flum's imagination. The wind was getting stronger and stronger by the moment, until it felt like there was a full-force gale whipping through the hallways.

Flum turned around, Souleater in hand. Sara moved in step with her, her own mace at the ready, as they faced the mauled remains of the ogre they'd left behind.

Much to their surprise, the mass of green flesh was no longer squirming around on the ground but floating in the air. The vortexes on all its severed body parts—its neck, arms, and legs—were spinning rapidly, spraying thick, goopy blood everywhere. It was hard to tell what the creature felt without a face to look at, but the way it moved gave Flum the impression that it was angry—murderously so.

No matter what happened to its body, no matter how much damage they did to it, the ogre seemed hellbent on killing Flum. Or at least, the entity that inhabited the ogre's body did. She'd never seen anything so obsessed before. And why should it be? She was just a simple farm girl from a backwoods village.

The spinning grew faster and the wind picked up, jostling the dead bodies littering the floor. Based on their experience fighting it so far, the ogre needed time to build up power to attack.

Flum and Sara yelled out in unison as they lunged in to strike. Thanks to the infusion of prana, Souleater cut deep into the creature's chest, but the gash quickly began to spin, staunching the blood as the wound froze over. Meanwhile, Sara's mace did little noticeable damage. Frustrating as these results were, they had to stop this thing before it got any stronger. Flum decided it best to focus her efforts on delivering as many cuts as she could, and Sara followed up with blows to the frozen wounds, knocking off more of the ogre's torso chunk by chunk.

But the spinning didn't stop and the wind only grew fiercer. What had once

been a strong gust was now a mighty gale. They were nearing tornado-level wind speeds.

“How much of this thing do we need to cut off before it stops?!”

“I don’t know! Gaaah!”

The metal plating attached to the walls screeched as the wind ripped them free and sent them flying. Flum and Sara struggled to keep their footing in the maelstrom. The ogre’s heart and even the majority of its organs were already destroyed, leaving only the stomach with its bizarre helix-shaped markings.

“We’ve already cut out your heart, okay?! Just die already!”

“It’s just a hunk of twisted meat at this point! Why won’t it stop?!”

“Just...stoooooooooop!!!”

The spiral markings covering the last bit of the ogre were just too hard for Flum’s sword to cut through. Even freezing them and smashing them with Sara’s mace had no effect. As far as Flum saw it, there was only one choice left: she’d need to pierce the thing with another prana-powered strike.

She clasped the hilt of Souleater in both hands and reached deep within herself once more, seeking to grasp that familiar sensation. This could be the decisive blow. Focusing all the prana into the very tip of the blade, Flum thrust Souleater into her target’s stomach.

“Nnnng... waugh?!”

She looked over to see Sara lose her balance and slip on the blood-soaked floor.

“I...I know you got this, Flum. I’m... Don’t worry ’bout me.”

“Sara!!”

If Sara got sucked into the cyclone of debris and dead bodies, it would be over for her. She was clinging desperately to the floor, but it was only a matter of time until she lost her grip as her palms grew slick with sweat and her muscles twitched.

The only way Flum could help her now was to end this as fast as possible.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!”

With that final cry of frustration, she grasped every last iota of prana she could muster and forced it into the blade to bolster her curse-enhanced strength. And yet, it still wasn't enough. She felt the tip of the blade sink just barely beneath the surface. Though it was slowly plunging deeper and deeper, it wouldn't be in time to save her companion.

She needed to do this if they were going to live. She needed to reach deep within herself and dump everything she had into this. If she was out of power, then she needed some way to find more.

That was when it dawned on Flum: she had someone waiting for her to come home. Milkit was waiting for her, and Flum couldn't bear the thought of leaving the girl all alone. Maybe it was co-dependent, even unhealthy, how they needed each other, but she didn't care. Death was simply not an option—not if it meant causing Milkit any further sorrow.

No. She wouldn't die. Not until she'd turned Milkit's life around.

Flum focused on the image of Milkit seared into her mind and extracted more energy than she ever knew she had, pouring it all into her blade.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!!”

She screamed so hard that her throat felt like it would tear. Her arms began to split, blood running down them as the impossible torrent of prana surged through her small frame. The moment one injury was healed, yet another tore open. It felt as if Flum, too, were being stabbed.

And yet the young girl pushed on through, as if in defiance of fate itself.



Her blade finally plunged through the floating mass of hardened flesh. There was a loud crack as something inside snapped, and a moment later, what was left of the ogre's body dropped to the floor. The wind died immediately, sending debris and dead bodies slamming down into their final resting places.

Flum gasped for air as she dropped to her knees, thoroughly spent. Her arms dangled weakly at her sides and she stared blankly up into the air.

"Did we... Is it really dead?"

Nothing remained of the ogre, not even a slab of flesh. All they could see was a shattered black crystal on the floor. Flum wasn't sure if that had been what was controlling it, but she could think about it later. All she wanted to do right now was rest.

"Y-you did it, Flum! You finally killed it!" Sara slumped to the floor, utterly exhausted.

"I...I really did do it, didn't I? Wow."

Flum's breath came out in ragged gasps, but she felt aglow a deep sense of pride over her achievement. Unable to fight back the exhaustion any longer, she slumped back onto her elbows before just rolling over on the ground. It felt so cool and supportive. She couldn't get up.

Chapter 12:

What Can I Believe In?

“THINK YOU CAN walk, Sara?”

“I think... Yeah, I got this.”

Flum grasped Sara’s hand tightly and pulled the younger girl up to her feet. They were a rather pitiful sight, their clothes ragged, stumbling from exhaustion. Flum wondered if they should have rested longer, but she also wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible.

The hallways were covered in debris, rendered completely impassable in places due to sections of the ceiling caving in. Fortunately, the girls didn’t encounter any enemies as they searched for alternative routes through the complex. Even the haunting voices calling for help had gone silent. The corpses once propped up to serve as traps lay discarded in the hallway, devoid of life. Gruesome holes had replaced the spiraling organs that had once inhabited their faces.

Flum grabbed Sara’s hand, helping pull her up and over a pile of collapsed debris. As Sara clambered down, her foot snagged on something, and she tripped forward into Flum’s arms.

“Waugh!!”

“Whoa, hey... Watch your step, huh?” Flum patted the top of Sara’s head affectionately.

“Sorry...” Sara glanced down shyly. “But y’know, if we’d run instead of staying to fight, we’d probably be dead by now.”

“Probably? Definitely. I just want to know who’d create something so insane...”

After killing the ogre, Flum had picked up the shattered crystal left in its place and put it in her rucksack for safe keeping. She’d dropped the bag at some point during her battle with the ogre, but fortunately found it again after all was said

and done. Sadly, the homemade lunch Milkit made for the two of them hadn't survived the ordeal. They'd eaten what they could salvage, at least, so hopefully Milkit would forgive them for letting her culinary efforts go to waste.

They finally passed through the area where they had fallen into the faceless woman's trap, entering a still-unexplored part of the complex. Up ahead, they found a room filled with several massive, cylindrical glass cases, a library full of empty shelves, and a break room with sofas and beds.

Every time they opened a door, Flum hoped it would be the one to lead outside, but so far she'd been disappointed. She felt her heart sink further and further with each wrong turn. The more defeated she felt, the heavier her badly-beaten body seemed to grow.

But still, she persisted.

"Hey, that kinda looks like an exit, yeah?" Sara pointed at something off in the distance.

It looked like an entrance to the facility, actually. The design was completely different from anything they'd seen thus far. The two girls exchanged looks and smiled before jogging excitedly toward the doors, which were dense and felt like they were made of solid metal.

Flum pushed them open. On the other side was a long stairwell leading up to a hatch. Once they made it to the top and slid the bolt holding it closed, Flum lifted the hatch.

"Finally!!!"

The glorious orange rays of the setting sun shone down on her face. She instinctively brought her arm up to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight, but it did little to wipe the smile from her lips.

Once they climbed through the hatch, the girls found themselves right in the midst of the grotto where they had first encountered the bizarre ogre. The dense underbrush had served as the perfect camouflage for the hatch entrance. Though she knew logically that only a few hours had passed since she'd been here last, breathing fresh air again was so invigorating that Flum could have been persuaded they'd spent several days underground.

She threw her hands in the air and let out a luxurious sigh, stretching her body in the glow of the sun. Sara quickly climbed up after her and went through the same motions.

“Aaah, now we can finally get on headin’ home!”

Flum shared the younger girl’s excitement, but she seemed to be forgetting one important detail. “Unfortunately, we still have another challenge to contend with, remember?”

“A...challenge? Oh...oh! Right, that!”

Sara visibly slumped as she looked back over at the collapsed rocks blocking their way out of the cave. After all they’d been through with the ogre, she’d forgotten about what Dein’s underlings had done.

Flum puffed her cheeks out. “If those jerks ever show their faces again, I’ll show them what for!”

“Hey, Flum, think you can use that Cavalier Arts thing on it?”

“I can give it a shot, but I’m kinda worried I only have one good swipe left in me. Besides, wouldn’t a mace be better suited to smashing rocks?”

“No way, I’m totally spent.”

“Then I guess we’re just gonna have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

It’d be tough going but doable without a monster chasing them around. Flum and Sara made their way over toward the collapsed entrance and grabbed the nearest rock.

Two ordinary girls could never have moved something that size. But Flum and Sara were an adventurer and a battle-hardened nun, and they were probably stronger than many grown men. Together, they hefted the rock up and moved it out of the way before dropping it to the ground with a thud.

Flum wiped the sweat from her brow before moving on to the next stone. Sara, meanwhile, wrapped her arms around a rock as wide around as her own torso. However, before she could heft it up, something caught Flum’s attention.

Just across from the entrance, something stood in the middle of a patch of green between a stand of trees.

Bjwooop, bjwoop.

Their eyes met. Or would have, had the other party had an eye. In any case, it was clear that Flum had been noticed.

The spiral-shaped organ began to spew blood in excitement at catching sight of its prey.

“No way...”

Sara cocked her head to the side. “Hey, Flum, what’re you do...ing...”

She caught sight of what Flum was looking at mid-sentence and froze.

One question kept running through Flum’s mind: how?

She remembered the shattered glass cases they had seen on their way through the facility. Had there been more than one of those things? And...had the one they encountered underground actually been a completely different individual from the one they’d originally met in the clearing?

“I don’t believe this... Just how many of those things are there??”

Flum retreated until she felt cool stone press against her back. She could move no further. They had managed to make a small hole in the rock pile, but it wasn’t anywhere near big enough to fit through.

If she hadn’t used up all her endurance, she could take this second ogre out with the Cavalier Arts. But she knew she just didn’t have the strength left. They could run and try to find a place to hide while she rested, but it was very unlikely they’d be able to evade the thing for that long.

Basically, they were as good as dead.

“I’m sorry, Milkit.”

Even as Flum made peace with the fact that she was going to die, she intended to fight to the bitter end. Her only regret was that she wouldn’t be able to make good on her promise to return to Milkit’s side.

She stuck out her hand and summoned forth the Souleater. She grasped the handle tight and gave the sword a few practice swings before pointing its tip right at her opponent.

Sara also raised her mace, ready for battle.

The vortex in the middle of the ogre's face spun almost cheerfully, sputtering blood onto the ground before them. The creature slowly, casually even, approached the two girls with its arms still dangling at its side, like a child on a picnic, heading back over to the blanket for a snack. It seemed quite pleased to find that its prey had returned.

Once it stood just beyond the Souleater's reach, it stopped and looked down at her, eyeing its prey, gauging how much of a fight they could put up. Its victory was practically assured. It raised its fist to strike.

"Run, Sara!!"

"We're not gonna lose this one, Flum!"

They stood their ground in defiance.

But before the ogre's blow could land, Flum suddenly caught sight of a woman stepping out from the bushes. She looked like she was in her twenties, with blue skin and dark blue hair, dressed in rather revealing attire.

The woman moved her fingers through the air as if she were playing an invisible harp. Her rouged lips curled up into a smile.

"Crimson Sphere."

A turquoise ball made completely of air appeared before her, then bounced toward the ogre and struck it from behind. The sphere grew until it was about three meters across, completely enveloping the ogre. Countless blades of wind swooped in from every direction, cutting through the ogre like sharpened scythes. With nowhere to run, the creature feebly threw its arms up to protect itself, only to have them chopped to shreds. Its head, legs, and torso followed shortly thereafter.

Much like the one they'd encountered underground, each gash in its skin led to the formation of yet another vortex which quickly stopped the bleeding before hardening into a protective layer. But it was no match for such powerful magic, which continued to slice and dice the ogre's body before the wound could even finished hardening.

True to the attack's name, the sphere enveloping the ogre was now painted with dark red blood. All Flum and Sara could do was stand there and watch, dumbfounded, as something they'd fought tooth and nail against was taken down so easily.

The winds slowly died down, and piece by piece, the chunks of what had once been the ogre dropped to the ground with a series of wet thuds. The black crystal that once inhabited its core sat amidst a puddle of blood.

The woman scowled and plucked up the crystal. After using another blast of wind magic to blow the blood off it, she brought it to eye level and inspected it closely.

"Gah. I can't believe humans would actually create something like this. It's quite strange, don't you think, Flum?"

"M-my..."

"Are you meowing now? Aw, are you a cat?" The woman pulled her hands up in front of her bountiful chest and curled her fingers in like cat paws.

Flum was at a complete loss for words. Meanwhile, a look of hatred greater than anything she'd shown the ogre washed over Sara's face as she faced the demon.

"Oh, and who are you?" the demon mused. "You're a cute little thing, aren't you? Would you happen to be one of the sisters of Origin?"

"Don't call me cute, you murderer! You make my skin crawl!!"

The blue-skinned woman's shoulders slumped at Sara's anger. "It's the same thing every time, isn't it? First that Maria girl, now you."

"Of course she hates you! You bastards took our homes and everyone that was important to us! The only thing that can answer my hatred, my anger, is your death!"

Sara looked on the verge of lunging in to strike at the woman, but Flum quickly stepped up to her side and put a hand on her shoulder. "Calm down, Sara. Please."

"Calm down? Calm down?? She's a demon! All demons do is..."

“Just...listen. Try scanning her real quick.”

Sara huffed a bit before turning to cast Scan on the woman.

Neigass

Affinity: Blood; Wind

Strength: 3596

Magic: 15997

Endurance: 2479

Agility: 3698

Perception: 7854

Flum could see the lump forming in Sara's throat as she looked over those numbers. It was the same feeling she'd had earlier.

Sara let her mace drop to the ground, defeated. Neigass shot Flum a thumbs up and smiled. It was awkward, to say the least, given that Flum's only previous interactions with Neigass had been on the field of battle.

"So now that you've calmed down, mind if we have a chat?" Neigass proposed.

Sara didn't look completely convinced, but she seemed to at least be willing to listen.

"Very well, then. I think some introductions are in order, don't you? I'll start. My name is Neigass, my affinities are wind and blood, which gives me power over darkness, and I'm a lot older than most humans. I'm also one of the Demon Chiefs, whom I'm sure you've heard of, and yes, of course, I'm a demon. But I think you already knew that."

Flum and Sara stared back in silence, unresponsive.

Neigass puffed out her cheeks at this.

"What's with you two?? I just introduced myself, so I think it'd only be polite if Sara here... Whoa, hey, don't glare at me like that! Didn't your parents teach you any manners, kid?"

"Why should I introduce myself to the likes of you?? If you're so strong, why

don't you just kill us now and get it over with?!"

"Like I said, I'm a deeeeemon, all right? I don't kill people."

The words flowed from her lips as if it were a well-known fact. This set Sara off like a struck match.

"Don't play us for fools! You've killed countless people and robbed even more of their homes!!"

"Oh, and you've seen that with your own eyes?"

This made Sara pause for a moment. "I, well...not exactly. But...but the church took me in and told me that's what happened!"

"Hmm now, just hear me out. You're standing in the middle of this vast facility in the middle of nowhere, doing god-knows-what, and you still believe everything the church tells you?" Neigass held up the black crystal as she spoke.

"Hmmp..." Sara had no response to that.

Flum, on the other hand, was stuck on something else. "What makes you say the church had a hand in creating this place?"

"You didn't notice?" Neigass queried. "Honestly, I didn't go all the way inside, but the church's symbol was a pretty good clue. You'd think Sara would have picked up on it, hmm?"

Sara looked down and bit her lip.

After a brief moment of hesitation, she said, "I did notice the intertwined rings that serve as the mark of Origin. I've had this really bad feeling ever since. Also, that researcher's notes were sayin' a lot about knowledge, wisdom, and other phrasing used by the church. It reminded me of a lot of the religious texts I've read. After a bit, I started to think it might really be an Origin facility, but I didn't want to believe it..."

"So the church is experimenting on people...and now a demon's here," Flum said, stunned. "What were they *doing* here?"

"We don't exactly look fondly on the kinds of things they were researching, so when I found out this place existed, I came to give it a look."

Which suggested that whatever the church was researching would have been bad news for the demons. This wasn't surprising, in and of itself. Both church and government considered the demons their mortal enemies, and this research had likely been established as part of their ongoing quest to destroy them.

Performing experiments on humans, however, was an entirely different kettle of fish. The strange vortexes were massively powerful, sure, but Flum couldn't bring herself to make peace with the thought of experimenting on people, even if the result could be used to slay the demons.

"But that's enough from me. What brings you here, Flum? I haven't seen you with the rest of the party lately. And...hey, isn't that thing on your cheek the mark of a slave?"

"Well, umm..." Flum hesitated.

Sara looked over at Flum in surprise. "Flum... You're not Flum Apricot the *hero*, are you?"

"I guess you could say that. But I wasn't much use to the party, so they kicked me out and sold me off as a slave. That's how I ended up here."

"That's terrible!"

"Oh, wow, that's bad..."

Both the other people present seemed surprised to hear this, though their reactions were quite different: Sara was scowling, while Neigass simply smirked.

"Putting that aside for the moment," the demon said, "that still doesn't tell me what you're doing here. It doesn't seem like you're here to investigate the facility."

Sara sighed. "We, uh, we came here on a job to pick up some herbs."

"Oh, now that's interesting. Doesn't the church outlaw the use of herbs?"

"Illegal or not, this person is suffering, and herbal medicine is the only thing that can help them!"

The demon clasped her hands in front of her chest, her eyes twinkling. "Aww, Flum, this is a really sweet girl you've got here!"

“Yeah, she’s a good kid.” Flum didn’t know how to react to Neigass’s sudden friendliness, though she didn’t appear to be lying. At the very least, she wasn’t detecting any malice behind her smile or her rank demeanor.



“Ah, well, it all makes sense now. So you were attacked by these awful experiments while you were hunting for herbs and accidentally ended up in the facility? And then, just as you were about to meet an awful end, this lovely lady here came and saved you both!”

“Well, Flum killed the first one...” Sara said.

Neigass was visibly surprised. “You killed one of those things?!”

“So did you, ya know?”

“Well, yes, but my magic is pretty powerful. Flum... Well, not so much. Last time I fought the party, you were just a little country bumpkin hanging out on the sidelines. How did you take down something like that?”

“It’s all kind of a blur, to be honest.” The memories were starting to collapse into each other. Flum remembered a lot of yelling, and fighting fiercely. “I mean, I stabbed it really hard and shattered this crystal thing that was stuck inside it. Then it just...kinda...stopped moving.”

Neigass’s expression abruptly grew more serious. “You broke the core?”

She approached Flum and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Do you have it with you??”

“I do, yes.”

Flum reached into her bag and handed the crystal over to Neigass. The demon woman held it up to her face and inspected it closely.

“Hmm, seems like it’s broken. But how? Wait...that’s impossible.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. Hey, do you mind if I keep this broken core?”

Given the choice, Flum would have liked to take the crystal with her so she could have someone take a look at it. But if this facility had been built by the church, the government was almost certainly involved, and so no matter where she took it, it would wind up snatched from her hands and made to disappear. Practically speaking, a demon was probably the only person she could trust it

with.

“Sure. I have no use for it.”

“Thank you,” Neigass said. “This will be very helpful.”

Flum wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“Come to think of it, we still haven’t found the herbs,” Sara volunteered.

“I was thinking we could get started on that once we cleared the rocks blocking the exit.”

“Hmm? Now that you mention it, why is the cave blocked off?”

“Let’s just say there were some jerks who have it out for us.”

“Sounds like you two have had a pretty eventful day. Let me take care of that for you. Erosion!”

With a fanciful wave of her hand, Neigass launched a spell at the rockslide blocking their way. A burst of black wind materialized from thin air and enveloped the debris, slowly grinding it to dust and chips until nothing remained.

“Listen, if any other monsters show up, I’ll take care of them for you. You girls just focus on hurrying up and finding those herbs.”

Sara looked puzzled. “But why would you help us?”

Neigass smiled back warmly.

“I know it’s still hard for you to trust me, but our needs *are* in line with each other. I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“C’mon, Sara,” Flum said. “Let’s hurry up and get this over with.”

“Gotcha!”

The girls quickly went about gathering all the kialahri they could find, plus several other herbs they happened across along the way. It felt strange to have a demon watching their backs, but Neigass even escorted them all the way back to the cave’s entrance, swiftly dispatching any monsters they ran into along the way.

As they said goodbye to their unexpected companion, Flum had one final question. “Hey, Neigass?”

“What is it, honey?”

“Is it true that demons don’t kill humans?”

“Well, I can’t speak in absolutes. There were casualties during the war, when the humans invaded our territory, of course. But we are sworn to not kill people merely for our own benefit or enjoyment.”

“Swore? To who?”

Neigass put a finger to her lips in thought. “Hmm, now that’s a tough question.”

She turned her smile at Sara.

“We don’t believe in anything like a god, per se. But we make that promise to everyone we meet, including you, Sara.”

“I...see.”

Sara neither rejected nor accepted Neigass’s claims but turned to leave instead. That was fair enough. She’d spent the past eight years of her life hating demons, and those lessons weren’t going to unlearn themselves anytime soon. The fact that they’d been able to have this civil a conversation was impressive in and of itself.

With their goodbyes out of the way, Neigass turned around and made her way back into the cave.

Using the dim light cast by their lanterns, Flum and Sara picked their way through the forest on their way back to town. Insects chirped in the distance like a chorus of tiny bells, giving their journey a rather melancholy feel.

Sara remained quiet as they walked, her face clouded over with a complicated expression. Flum decided to leave her travel companion to her thoughts for the first half of the trip, before finally speaking up.

“That was a lot to take in. I’m still not sure I understand all of it.”

“Me too. I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“Think that really was a church facility?”

“If even a nun like myself could cotton on to it, the senior priests must’ve noticed that the church is hiding something.”

“The church would take a pretty big hit to its reputation if it got out that they were performing experiments on humans.”

“Definitely. I’m sure they wanna keep this hush-hush, whatever the cost.”

Which might extend to getting rid of the two of them, Flum thought. “We should probably keep this to ourselves, then.”

Sara nodded in agreement but said nothing further. As a nun, this had to be much harder for her to swallow than it was for Flum, but it was easy to imagine the terrible things that awaited her if she ever breathed word of it to anyone.

No matter how much she racked her brains, Flum kept coming to the same conclusion: their best bet was to hold their tongues and keep mum. No point thinking about it any further, then. For now, she just wanted to get back to Milkit and sleep the sleep of the dead.

The two continued their silent march on toward Anichidey.

Chapter 13:

The Heart that Melts

IT WAS ALREADY well past nightfall when they arrived in Anichidey, which looked much as it had when they first arrived by cart: wrapped in a veil of darkness. Even the sporadic lights shining like beacons from the few inhabited homes felt dimmer than the previous night, though that was probably due to their sheer exhaustion.

The sound of their feet scraping across the dusty streets echoed loudly in the night. Their legs felt heavy, but the allure of being so close to the inn drew them in like moths to a flame. After turning the last corner, they finally caught sight of the building.

Flum broke out into a grin at the thought of Milkit sitting patiently in their room, awaiting their return. She glanced over at Stude's house and noticed that the light was out. Asleep, maybe? Sure, people in small towns tended to be early risers, but it still seemed kind of early to go to bed. Maybe he'd just gone out somewhere.

As they walked past Stude's house, Flum suddenly stopped. Sara kept going another few steps before she noticed Flum was no longer with her and turned around in concern.

"What's wrong?"

Flum slowly turned her head and glanced at the house's front door. Her face was white.

There were no lights on inside, but the front door was half-open. A lace curtain outlined the window, beyond which Flum caught sight of a cup laying on its side on the dinner table.

Her mind raced.

Dein's goons had used their magic to trap her and Sara in the cave. They'd heard the cave was filled with monsters and that no one ever returned, and

were probably convinced that Flum and Sara had met the same fate. So then, what would they do upon returning to town?

She caught a whiff of blood in the air, drawing her to Stude's house.

Dein and his goons were only adventurers in name. He used his influence in the guild to lord it over the West District, stealing whatever they pleased without a second thought, like the snatch-and-grab they'd tried to pull on Leitch. Far from the church's knights or royal guards in a small town like this, there was little to keep them in check.

Flum put her hand on the door and pushed it open. She was instantly met with the overpowering coppery scent of blood. The flickering light of a dying candle was the only illumination in the room.

No, theft was small potatoes to guys like this. Fraud, violence, and even murder meant little to them. Dein was probably livid at having their attempt to rob Leitch thwarted and his underlings captured by the church knights.

So what would he do in revenge?

Flum stepped over the threshold. The wooden floor creaked under her shoes as she walked into the dining room, which looked as if it had been ransacked. There was a man slumped face down on the table, a knife protruding from his back and his blue shirt stained red with blood.

She'd never seen him before. Maybe one of Stude's friends who came over to visit?

Flum squeezed her hand into a fist and clenched her jaw. Looking at the floor, she noticed a trail of blood leading away from a chair and past her feet.

So there were still more victims.

Her eyes followed the blood trail down the hall.

This was all so unfair.

The floor creaked under her feet as she traveled to the bedroom. The door was ajar. Flum hesitantly pushed it open; the hinges cried out in objection, startling her.

Killing her and Sara wasn't enough for Dein and his men. Murder was little

more than a diversion to them. They must have felt compelled to strike anyone who'd had any interaction with Flum and Sara, too.

At least, that was the best Flum could do to comprehend the sick logic that had gone into the creation of the horrific scene in front of her.

A man and a woman lay motionless on the bed. Even in the darkness, she could still make out what happened: an old woman lying on her back, and a younger man laying over her, as if to protect her.

Stude and his mother.

The whole room was filled with the smell of blood.

They'd lived completely normal lives and had done nothing wrong. The only sin they'd committed was giving Flum a place to sleep for the night.

Flum began to scream.

It was the only way she could give voice to the burgeoning dark emotions that took hold of her as she blamed herself for the fate that had befallen her friend. Her cries weren't fueled by a sense of wronged righteousness but something far simpler: rage.

This was absolutely unforgivable.

Consumed by fury, Flum flew out of Stude's house in a mad dash, her exhaustion long forgotten. Sara called out to her in confusion, but Flum ignored her and continued on toward the inn. If those bastards had laid a hand on her...

She drove herself forward, her feet pounding so hard on the floorboards that she worried they'd splinter.

But she had to keep going, she needed to keep going. There was no time to spare.

They'd hear her coming, but would they even care? If they would run, then let them. If they wanted to stand and fight, then so be it. But no matter what they did, even if they were to drop to their knees and beg for forgiveness, even offering their flesh up to the gods themselves, Flum would see to it that they were not redeemed.

Earlier that night, Milkit had sat on the edge of the bed as she waited for Flum and Sara to return. With nothing around to entertain herself, and no real desire to walk the darkened streets, she simply sat there in the dark, waiting for time to pass. This didn't bother her. She was used to being left alone and ignored.

She kicked her legs as she watched the hands of the clock slowly continue their journey. Flum and Sara had only taken lunch with them, so they must have planned to be back this evening. And yet, despite the fact that it was already quite dark out, they still weren't back.

Milkit could feel a looming sense of anxiety come over her.

"You're fine... I know you are."

The darker it got, the more worried she grew. After a while, her heart was pounding so fast she felt it would burst. She brought her hand to her chest and could feel it thumping away, hard.

"Master... Sara..."

She worried for them dearly.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps in the hall. Two sets, in fact. Milkit quickly jumped to her feet and jogged toward the door.

"Master, you must be..."

She swung the door open.

"...tired?"

Two grown men stood before her.

One, his face covered in piercings, reached down and grabbed her face through the bandages. She tried to scream, but the man's hand muffled any attempt at making noise, and her captor just laughed sadistically.

The other man's right arm was covered completely with tattoos. He leaned over the first's shoulder and looked at Milkit. "Now what do we have here??"

The pierced man offered up a cruel smile. "She's not much, but I think she'd make for a better hole to get off in than that old hag or the other guy back there."

Judging by his voice, it was clear that he was high on something. The man gripped Milkit's face even harder and shoved her back toward the bed. She tumbled backwards onto the mattress, feeling her body tense up with fear as the man climbed up and sat on her. If she wasn't careful now, who knew what he would do to her?

"Ah, so I see you've calmed down, hun. I guess you're used to this?" He started yanking off his shirt.

She didn't...couldn't reply.

"Why so quiet now, girlie?? C'mon, speak up! Answer me, dammit!!"

The pierced man yanked Milkit's head up by her hair and slapped her hard across the face several times. Her continued silence only seemed to incense him further, but then his outburst suddenly subsided just as quickly as it started. He smiled, let go of her head, and shook off the stray strands of silver hair that still clung to his fingers.

"Hey, I'm really sorry 'bout that. I just tend to slap girls around when I get too excited, y'know? Most of 'em don't make it. A real shame, y'know. But I just really love to see a girl suffer. Can't get enough!"

Milkit began to sob quietly.

"Aww now, don't you cry there, lil' lady. But I think it's 'bout time you started answering me. You're a virgin, yeah?"

Milkit nodded.

His face immediately went serious. "I can't hear you."

"Y-yes."

"You need to answer my question more specifically."

"I'm...I'm a virgin."

"Speak up!!!"

"I'm a virgin!"

The man's grin broadened at the clear discomfort in her voice.

"Gyahahahahaha!! Wauhahaha! Man, I just love embarassin' little girls like

that. I guess boys really never do grow up, huh? Hahahaha!”

He pulled his dagger from its sheath and pressed it against her chest before slowly dragging it up, cutting open her blouse and exposing her bra. He smiled darkly down at her.

“So how d’ya wanna die?”

“Die...?”

“I can stab you in the mouth or maybe slit your throat? How about stabbing you in the heart, that might be easier?”

How was Milkit supposed to choose the method of her own death? But if she didn’t say anything, he might get mad and start hitting her again. She knew she needed to answer, and fast.

“What’s with the long face, girlie?”

Her time was up far sooner than she anticipated. The man’s face contorted in anger and flushed a deep crimson. Sudden mood swings were common among junkies, and it was clear even to Milkit’s eyes that he was using one of the many illicit substances running rampant in the capital. There was no reasoning with him.

He wrapped both his hands around her neck.

“So you wanna play rough, huh?? Man, virgins nowadays sure are frisky! Y’know, buddy, I’m really starting to worry about young girls these days. Gyahahaha!”

“Hya...hynnngh...”

As her vision began to fade to black, all Milkit could think of was her master and how she still hadn’t returned.

Flum stuck her head through the open doorway and screamed, “Milkiiiiit!”

Three sets of eyes fell on her. There was a tattooed man, another covered with piercings, and Milkit, pinned to the bed and being choked out. Her clothes were torn open, and her pearly white skin was exposed to the open air.

Milkit managed to croak a cry for help.

“Master...”

Flum was clenching her teeth so hard she worried her jaw might shatter.

This was unforgivable. People who attacked completely innocent bystanders in a sick bid at revenge were little better than animals, in her opinion. In the name of the downtrodden and the victimized, she would make these monsters suffer.

“You’re done for.”

Even Flum was surprised at how cool and level her own voice was. She stepped toward the tattooed man.

“What the hell?! They said no one ever came back...!”

The man grabbed his knife, but that was as far as he got. The Souleater’s razor-sharp blade swung silently through the air and slid easily through his waist, cleaving him in two. He would never speak another word again.

At the end of her swing, Flum brought the sword back to the ready, spattering blood across the room and staining the pierced man’s face. The tattooed man’s upper torso slid off of his lower waist like a freshly felled tree before dropping to the ground. His head hit the floor with a loud thunk and his jaw chattered bizarrely, though no words came out. A moment later, his legs slid off the bed as well, staining the floor with a disgusting mixture of blood, guts, and other bodily fluids.

“Wha...” The pierced man gasped and wiped the spattered blood from his face. “Now wait just a second, you wench! I haven’t even gotten off yet!!”

He apparently still had more than enough will to live, though, as he quickly opened the window and dove outside, tumbling into the dark streets below.

“Wait here, Milkit!”

“Haaah...”

Milkit sighed in relief at the sound of her master’s voice as Flum hopped out the window after the man.

A desire to see blood burned brightly in Flum's eyes.

Once outside, Flum found the darkened outline of the man against the even darker shadows of the night. It was hard to make him out, but he was still close enough to be seen with the naked eye.

She hefted her Souleater into the air with one hand and took off in hot pursuit. He was a D-to C-Rank adventurer at best. There was no way he could outrun her.

The man glanced over his shoulder at the sound of her footsteps, the metal rings in his face clanged together like a fire engine. The fear in his eyes was readily apparent as he watched Flum close in.

"No way! How in the hell can a runt like you keep up like this?! Dammit! He told me this would be an easy job! I'm supposed to go back to the capital, get my money, and live the life of luxury!!" He didn't seem remotely concerned about the death of his comrade. "That guy and his old lady dropped like fleas! I should've been off and on my way home by now!"

"Do you really want those to be your last words?"

"Waaaugh?!"

Flum glared at him through the darkness. To the man's shock and horror, she was now running side by side with him.

Realizing that running was no longer an option, he stopped and made one last-ditch effort to beg for mercy.

"Haah...haah...hyahaha. No need to be so angry there, lil' lady. It's not like I actually did anything to 'er. Listen, I'll even pay you for the damage to her clothes. See? All better, yeah? They probably weren't too very expensive, right? Who'd spend good money on a nasty little slave like that?"

He dropped to his knees and bowed till his forehead touched the ground. Flum stared down at him with a cold glare.

"Listen 'ere, I didn't even do anything wrong! It was that tattooed freak that killed the guy and the hag!"

Flum couldn't tell if he actually thought this would save his life, but it didn't make much difference to her. She raised the Souleater high in the air. The dark blade blended seamlessly with the darkness, making it hard for the man to gauge just how long he had left to live.

"Flum, stop!!"

Sara's voice interrupted her before she could bring the sword all the way down.

Whether you believed in Origin or not, murder was, after all, still wrong. Someone like Sara, who believed so strongly in the good of humanity, couldn't stand by and watch this happen.

"Stude and his mother are alive!!" Sara cried. "I cast healing magic on them, and they're okay again!"

"But what about that other guy they killed, Sara? They aren't innocent."

"That...that's true. But not every death should be answered with death. There are more appropriate punishments!"

"Ha...hyahahahaha!"

The pierced man lunged toward Flum from behind and brought his dagger to her neck. His look of fear had now been replaced with a fierce, maniacal grin as he smiled over Flum's shoulder at Sara.

"Hyahaha! Nice assist there, girlie! Who woulda thought a nun would help me kill this little brat? Ya know, for a moment there I thought I was done for! Gahahaha! But nope, this lil' lady of the cloth saved me. Praise be!"

The goon was in high spirits now, assured of his victory. Sara stood there in shock, unable to get out a word.

"Hey, Sara..." Flum said.

"Whoa, whoa! All I have to do is press down and you're gonna be spraying blood all over the place, y'know. Shouldn't you be crying? Begging for mercy, maybe?"

The man's attempts at intimidation didn't have much impact on Flum. They only reminded her of Jean, the man who had sold her into bondage in the first

place, and the slave trader who bought her.

Even the best and most noble person, Flum thought, could only be pushed so far once you'd robbed them of their dignity. She could never—would never—be as good a person as Sara.

"You know, I said this before..." she started again.

The man pressed the dagger harder to her neck. "What, no apology? In that case, I'm just gonna have to kill ya!"

A thin trail of blood began to snake down Flum's neck. She didn't seem to even notice the pain as she continued, "This world is full of pieces of trash that never repent, never learn, and frankly, would be better off dead."

As she finished saying these words to Sara, the man dug down with his knife until it broke through in a shower of blood. Flum stumbled forward, took the knife from her neck, and threw it to the ground.

The man looked on in shock. "Wh-why aren't you dead?!"

As the collar of her shirt grew red with blood, she raised the Souleater and swung it down.

"Wait, stooooooooo...!"

He threw his arms up in a feeble attempt to protect himself, only to have them both lopped off. Blood drenched the street. He was losing so much blood that death was a foregone conclusion.

But Flum wasn't done yet.

"Aaaaugh! Wait, no, please...!"

"He who kills so easily now begs for mercy?"

"That's...that's different! I don't wanna die!!"

Flum looked at the pathetic expression on his face, lifted her sword, and rammed it straight through his head. The top of his skull spun through the air and disappeared into the dark night sky. A trail of blood in the sand left a grotesque marker for where it could be found.

"You're right. Listening to someone beg for their life isn't half-bad."

The decapitated body tensed for a second, until all brain functioning ceased and what remained of the pierced man went limp. The blood pouring from his head and the small puddle forming at the crotch of his pants made for a rather macabre scene.

Flum gave her sword a shake to remove all the flesh and blood still stuck to it before allowing it to disappear in a burst of light. She headed back to check in on Milkit.

As she passed Sara, she reached out and patted the girl's head gingerly.

"I'm sorry, Sara. But this is the path for me."

She hadn't always been like this. It was the circumstances of her life that had brought her here. After being betrayed again and again, Flum had come to finally see and accept the darkness that the world had to offer.

"Flum..."

Sara's voice was hardly above a whisper. It was like the Flum she'd known was gone, replaced by an entirely different person.

As Flum headed back to the inn, Sara could only stand in the street, alone with her thoughts and the stars.

Back in the hotel, the bedroom reeked of death. Milkit sat squarely in the middle of the bed, scrunched up into a ball in an attempt to hide her exposed chest.

Flum's heart ached to see her suffer. She stepped in close and put her hand to Milkit's cheek, feeling the subtle warmth radiate through the bandages. Finally, Milkit spoke up, though her demeanor was decidedly gloomy.

"He destroyed these lovely clothes you bought for me... I'm so sorry, Master."

Flum could have dealt with Milkit being angry with her, demanding to know why she hadn't returned earlier. Even though she knew Milkit still didn't understand that it was her every right to think such things, having her apologize was almost too much for Flum.

She looked down and shook her head, biting her lip hard in an attempt to

fight back the tears threatening to overflow at any moment.

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about.”

“Of course there is. Any gift from you, Master, should be treated with the utmost respect.”

“And what I’m saying is that you are way more important to me! Not clothes, okay? Forget about the stupid clothes. They’re...they’re nothing! What I care about is...definitely not that.”

Flum pulled Milkit’s face close to her chest and hugged her tightly. She was warm, her heart was beating, blood was flowing through her veins... She was alive. Milkit was still alive. If she’d arrived even a few minutes later, she may well have lost her, too.

The thought alone made her sick to her stomach.

“Master, are you crying?” Milkit looked up at Flum, whose shoulders were shaking. Her voice wavered as she tried to speak.

“Of, of course I’m crying. I’m crying at how weak and useless I am.”

Milkit desperately wanted to do something for her master but was at a complete loss. She reached up to hug Flum back but then hesitated and looked at her own palm.

She’d been told by several masters in the past that she was worthless and had believed that to be true. But now...now, things were different. Now, her current Master, Flum, was telling her that she was important. She didn’t quite believe it, yet, but it saddened Milkit to think that any damage inflicted upon her caused Flum such despair.

That was what hurt her. Not what she’d endured herself, but the thought that her master was truly upset by it. She felt her heart tense at the thought of that and her eyes well up.

“Milkit...” Flum looked back down at Milkit, her eyes red from crying. “That must’ve been really scary for you, right?”

“Scary?”

“I mean, you look like you’re about to cry. You were scared, weren’t you?”

Milkit raised her hand and tapped at her eyes, feeling moisture on her fingertips. She tried to describe her emotions as best she could.

“I had thought it quite unlikely Master would return to rescue a mere slave like myself. I can’t say if what I felt was fear or not, but as the man attacked me, I found myself imagining how wonderful it would be if Master did come to save me.”

She hadn’t exactly been expecting it to happen. It had been more like a far-fetched dream, a fantasy you indulged yourself.

“I’m truly sorry for making all these bold assumptions, Master. Perhaps I’ve allowed myself to take your kindness for granted.”

“Bold? No, not at all! You can expect, even demand, whatever you want of me, Milkit! I’ll do my best to make it happen!”

“But that’s...”

“That’s fine! Don’t think of us as slave and master, but Flum and Milkit! And even then, I was still too late. I wasn’t able to protect you.”

“Not at all. You saved my life, Master. If anything, I’m the one who failed to protect your beautiful gift.”

She just wouldn’t let the clothes go.

“Gah, will you just forget about the clothes? Seriously!”

Flum clung tightly to Milkit, and the two fell back onto the bed. She pressed her cheek tightly against Milkit’s and whispered into her ear. “When we get back to the capital, we’ll go shopping again, okay? I’ll buy you something even prettier and more expensive.”

“It’d be such a waste on me.”

“Fine! You can fix these clothes first. And then I’m gonna buy you a whole wardrobe of outfits and dress you all up in each and every one of them. Maybe then you’ll understand what I mean when I say that it’s not the clothes that are important, but the girl in them.”

“I’m...not sure I understand.”

“That’s fine for now. I’ll just keep buttering you up until the day comes when you do finally understand, even if it takes the rest of our lives. I’m going to see to it that you’re happy, Milkit, happier than anyone alive has ever been.”

Flum pressed her face tightly against the comforter and began to sob, unable to explain the feeling of immense sadness that gripped her heart in that moment. Milkit knew the tears were for her but still couldn’t understand why. Why would anyone ever cry for her? Why would someone want to make her happy?

So, she did what felt right in that moment. She reached out, ever so slowly, and wrapped her arms around Flum. She didn’t quite understand what meaning this action held, but it was what she chose to do.

Her heart felt warm in her chest. That much she knew.

Chapter 14:

Cheap Rent and a Strange Roommate to Boot

F LUM MADE HER WAY over toward the nearest house with a light in the window and asked the woman living there for help. She explained how the man in Stude's mother's house, ostensibly a friend of the family, was dead, and that she had hunted down and killed his murderers.

The woman eyed Flum suspiciously as she summoned the local militia. The burly group of men that showed up soon after at the house gave her similarly suspicious looks as she retold the story before embarking toward Stude's house.

Fortunately, their concerns were allayed when Stude and his mother corroborated everything Flum said. A short time later, the corpse slumped across the dinner table was removed from the house.

"Oh, James..." Stude watched sadly as his friend was carried away on a stretcher.

Flum clenched her hand into a fist as she watched the scene unfold. It was all so sad. The only victim to come out of all of this was a man who had absolutely nothing to do with any of it.

She finally made her way over to Stude's side. "Was he a friend of yours?"

His voice was uneven. "Yeah, from childhood. We hadn't seen each other in such a long time, so I invited him over for dinner. And then...and then..."

He was clearly clenching his jaw in an attempt to fight back tears. Despite his best efforts, one rolled down the side of his cheek and down to his jaw before dropping to the floor below. Stude dragged his large arm across his eyes.

"Sorry for being like this, Flum. I really need to get myself together."

"Not at all, Stude. Besides, it's my fault that they came here."

"Now don't you go there, Flum. If you guys hadn't shown up, me and my mother would be dead right now. I'm forever thankful for that, and don't you

forget it.”

“But...”

“Not only did you save me, but you avenged my friend. Thanks a lot, Flum.” Stude slapped her back and went over toward the militia men talking to his mother.

Flum wasn’t entirely convinced. She looked down at the sand-covered street and stared into the nothingness.

Later that night, the remains of the two thugs were scooped into hemp bags and unceremoniously discarded in the forest. The townsfolk might not be able to seek their own justice against the men, but they could deny them a proper burial at the very least. It was only a matter of time until wild animals feasted on their remains and the two men returned to the earth.

Sara had been in a dark mood since the encounter, but she still eagerly took responsibility for administering James his last rites the following morning, since there were no pastors or nuns in Anichidey. Despite how despondent she had been last night, she acquitted the task with well-practiced professionalism. She probably took some comfort in having a job to focus on.

Flum had been undecided about whether she would even attend the funeral until the very last minute. Everyone around her was sobbing at the loss of James, while she was filled with nothing but relief at knowing that Milkit was still safe. It hardly seemed right for her to be there.

“I really am cold-blooded, aren’t I?” she muttered to herself as she followed the funeral procession.

After all, even if she technically had nothing to do with the man’s death, she was the one who’d brought his killers here in the first place. It felt like a betrayal of Stude, who’d been nothing but kind to the two slave girls who showed up on his doorstep.

Milkit watched with concern as Flum chewed on her lip, before reaching out and tugging at her clothes. Flum interpreted this as Milkit’s attempt to cheer her up, and gave her a slight smile.

“Thank you.”

She reached out and intertwined her fingers with Milkit’s, pulling the other girl’s hand into her own. No one would notice them holding hands here in the middle of a funeral. But even such a light touch, from such a very simple act, made Flum’s whole body begin to warm up.

Both girls smiled as they basked in their shared warmth.

It was noon on the day after the funeral when the cart finally showed up, as promised, to take them back to the capital. Flum, Milkit, and Sara climbed in and waved goodbye to the townsfolk that came out to see them off. Stude still had some things to do and would be staying behind, so it looked as if this would be goodbye.

He tried to give Sara an envelope with money in it as thanks for performing James’s last rites, but she refused to take it. She probably felt some responsibility for what had happened—after all, she’d helped take down Dein’s goons.

Flum had told the townsfolk everything last night—that the men who did this were thugs working for an infamous adventurer and that they had followed her here. To her surprise, no one seemed to blame her. Rather, they were just thankful that Flum had avenged James’s death, and even expressed relief that Milkit was safe, leaving her newly impressed by how kindhearted these people were.

The townsfolk waved enthusiastically after the three girls until the town was nearly out of sight. Though Sara’s lips were smiling, her eyes were devoid of any emotion.

The cart traveled on for several hours without a single word exchanged between its occupants. Sara seemed particularly lost in thought, and seeing her friend so deeply affected by what had happened cast a cloud over Flum’s mood in turn. Milkit was also quieter than usual, though it was hard to tell if that was simply because she was following her master’s lead.

The horses continued to pull the cart forward through dusty dunes and into vast grasslands. A gentle breeze caressed their cheeks as they pressed on.

Sara ran a hand through her hair, brushing her golden locks out of her eyes, before finally breaking the silence.

“Y’know, I’ve been thinking...”

She didn’t take her eyes off the rolling green hills.

“I just don’t get it. I don’t know what to believe anymore. I’m not good with shades of grey.”

She was still so young; just ten years old. To Sara, this was still a world full of good and evil, of right and wrong.

“I think that’s fine, Sara.” Flum wasn’t in much of a place to talk, really, and she was no role model herself.

“But...but it’s all my fault that all this happened to you.”

“You can’t let yourself get hung up over something like that. Sure, I may have been stabbed in the neck, but I’m still here—still alive. Don’t worry so much about it.”

Sara seemed to visibly relax at this, though to tell the truth, the feeling of the knife cutting through Flum’s neck had been absolutely excruciating. The mere memory made her flesh tingle.

“Besides, I think it’s healthy for you kids to have a good, hard think about the world we live in.”

Sara laughed at Flum’s imitation of an old lady. “What’re you talkin’ about, Flum? You’re just six years older than me, ya know!”

“That’s six *whole* years, I’ll have you know. Now pay attention to what your big sis has to say.”

Sara pursed her lips in skepticism. “I dunno, you’re not very convincing.”

However, the dark cloud that had been hanging over her was mostly gone now. Sure, she still felt responsible for Flum getting hurt, but seeing Flum in such high spirits helped alleviate many of her worries. She was young and still

had a lot of growing up to do. As Flum said, it would probably do her some good to think about these things.

With Sara in a better mood, the whole cart seemed to brighten along with her. Conversation picked back up, ranging over a wider variety of topics than it had on the way up, thanks to how much closer they'd grown in the past few days. When the girls began to feel their stomachs grumble, they broke out the lunch Milkit had made for them using the rest of the ingredients they bought back in Anichidey.

After stuffing themselves, Sara and Milkit rested their heads on Flum's lap for a quick nap. Flum smiled down at them. They were heavy, but not so much so that she wanted them to move. Besides, it felt pretty good sitting here and feeling the cart rock underneath her.

Gradually, she gave in to the warm sensations that enveloped her and started to doze, letting her head rock back and forth like a boat on the open sea as she slowly drifted away.

The sounds of the horses' hooves and the cart's wheels echoed across the open plains as the girls slept peacefully.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, and they arrived near Leitch's manor in the East District right as planned. Flum had thought they were all going to report on the results of their search together, but Sara announced that this would be where they parted ways.

"If I show up too, he'll just try to pay me again." Rather than have to turn him down, she'd decided it was best to simply not go. "I'm assigned to the church in the Central District, so feel free to stop by any time you happen to be around! And I'm going to hold you to your promise of having dinner together, Flum! Lookin' forward to it!"

She vigorously waved her hand before heading back toward the church. Flum and Milkit waved after her until she was out of sight, but Flum visibly slumped once she was gone.

"What's wrong, Master?"

“Central District, huh? Since we’d met in the West District, I’d assumed she was working out of a church somewhere over there.”

Thinking it over, however, it was hard to believe that they’d assign a young girl with such talent to a small church among the generally unreliable populace of the West District. Massive and impersonal as the organization may be, it made sense that they’d want to put her in an environment more conducive to her growth.

“I guess it makes sense, when you think about it. But anyway, Leitch is probably waiting for us and we have some kialahri to deliver.”

“Certainly, Master.”

It still seemed odd to Flum that Leitch would leave the comforts of home and venture all the way out to the West District to hire someone, but now wasn’t the time to think about that. She and Milkit walked through the streets, passing rows and rows of massive manors, until they finally stopped in front of a particularly large one. Two slave girls walking around in the East District without their master attracted a lot of whispers and raised eyebrows from the passing nobles, but Flum didn’t really care. It was the same everywhere they went.

A guard standing by the gate to Leitch’s manor called out to Flum as she approached. There was no look of disgust on his face, much unlike the nobles who had passed by them earlier.

“May I ask your business?”

“My name is Flum. I’m working on a job for Leitch. May we enter?”

“Aah, Miss Flum? The Master has told me about you. Please, come on in.”

He quickly opened the gate and gestured the two girls onto the manor’s property.

A vast, flower-filled garden stretched out before them. Awed by the sheer immensity of the grounds alone, Flum did her best to not be distracted as they walked the path to the actual manor, which was visible in the distance.

Once at the manor’s massive double doors, she put her hand on the round, magic-powered switch embedded in the wall and fed a little magic into it. A

moment later, they heard a bell ring inside.

Milkit looked closely at Flum's hand in great interest. "How does that switch work?"

"If I recall correctly, it uses magic to pull and release a mallet, which strikes the bell."

"You certainly know a lot, Master."

"It's nothing special, really. Just something I learned in school."

"No, you truly are amazing, Master." Milkit's trust in Flum seemed to be growing day by day.

Flum blushed a bit at receiving such praise for something so simple. She scratched at her cheek in embarrassment. This really was something she'd learned as part of the standard school curriculum, but it was all new to Milkit, who'd never had the benefit of a proper education and sucked up new information like a sponge. Even if she had been curious about such things in the past, her previous masters hadn't condescended to answer, and she eventually stopped asking altogether.

Slowly but surely, Milkit was beginning to find her humanity again.

Flum smiled proudly as her younger companion stared at the magical implement with great interest until the door finally opened. An older man—a butler by the looks of it—bowed low and escorted the girls into the building.

This was the second time she'd been here, but Flum was still completely thrown by the enormity of the mansion. The grandeur of the foyer was testament to how Leitch's life was worlds apart from that of a commoner. Glorious chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceilings, and the patterns on the rug underfoot were so bright and beautiful that Flum felt uncomfortable walking over it with her shoes on.

Even her uneducated eye could tell that the vases, urns, and paintings that adorned the rooms were all of the highest quality. These were riches beyond the means of even the wealthiest people in the West and Central Districts.

The girls made their way up a flight of stairs with a beautiful wooden banister.

It was intricately carved at both ends and polished to such a sheen that Flum could see her face in it; neither she nor Milkit dared touch it for fear of messing up that sheen. Once they reached the second floor, they were escorted into a reception room.

Flum sat down in a chair and gently placed her elbows on the armrests. Despite having sat here before, she was taken by surprise at how comfortable it was. Milkit stubbornly stood just behind her, but Flum insisted—ordered, even—that she sit down. With a wry grin, she mumbled something to herself about Milkit someday sitting down on her own without being told to.

Moments later, two servants showed up with sweet smelling herb tea and fruit cakes for them to snack on while they waited for Leitch. With food like this to occupy her, Flum was happy to let him take his time. Alas, he turned up about ten minutes later. Judging by the sweat on his forehead, he'd hurried here as fast as he could.

“Apologies, Miss Flum, Miss Milkit. Oh...where’s Miss Sara?”

“She needed to return to the church.”

“Oh? Well, that’s too bad. I’ll have to go visit her myself and offer up my apologies.” Leitch pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead as he sat down. He then immediately got down to business. “So, did you find the kialahri?”

Flum picked up a small bag sitting next to her chair and handed it to Leitch. The older man quickly opened the bag, looked inside, and broke out in a broad grin.

“Well, I’ll be...”

Tears of joy welled up in his eyes, and he was left speechless. It was all he could do to stare, eyes locked on the bag’s contents. Once he’d finally had a chance to collect himself, he bowed deeply to Flum, his head practically touching the table.

“Thank you so much! With this, I can save my beloved wife. Words can never truly express how thankful I am for what you’ve done for us!”

Flum wasn’t really sure how to respond to this. “No need to bow like that to

me, Leitch. We've just done the job asked of us."

"But, but...still! This herb has eluded me for so long, and then some young girl I just happened to cross paths with went and procured it for me... It's truly a miracle!"

It hadn't exactly been a walk in the park, but Flum didn't want to bother him with the details.

"Now, for your payment. Anything you want, it's yours. I will do whatever I can within my power to make your wish come true."

"Uh, wow, I hadn't really thought about it too much. Milkit, is there anything you want?"

"I'm really not sure."

"Thought so. Um, is money okay?"

"Of course! I'll pay you whatever you ask."

It seemed like Leitch was telling the truth, too. He really would pay her whatever she asked. Flum gulped hard at the prospect but resolved to be straight forward and just ask for what she wanted. At present, that was just one thing.

"Got it! I'm looking to rent a place in the West District that we can use as a home base of sorts. Do you know anything good?"

Leitch frowned slightly, undoubtedly wondering why they would choose somewhere so dangerous. "The West District, you said?"

With his help, they could probably find somewhere to live in the Central District, or even the East District, if they wanted to. But Flum had no intention of running from her problems. She was going to pay Dein back.

Leitch watched her closely for a moment, as if gauging her commitment, before clapping his hands together. "I think I have just the right place."

"Looks like the place."

"Seem so."

Flum and Milkit looked up at the building marked on the document they'd been given.

"I'd kind of just assumed it was a single room."

"So did I."

"But...a whole building?"

Flum didn't know what to make of this. Sure, she'd asked Leitch if he knew of a good place, but this place seemed relatively safe by West District standards. It was even pretty close to the border with the Central District. Not to mention...

"This is a whole house, Milkit!"

Never in her wildest dreams had Flum imagined that Leitch would just give her a whole house, and a two-story one, at that. The document he'd handed them was the deed. According to Leitch, he'd had this property left over from his real estate flipping days and giving it away cost him so little that he'd insisted on handing Flum a bag of money to go with it. He'd also given her an ornate ring with an enchantment to give to Sara to thank her for her help. It was quite apparent how deeply indebted he felt to them.

"I don't see anything wrong with this, Master. After all, you suffered a great deal and worked very hard for this."

"I did suffer, sure, but this??"

"Well, I think it's fitting."

"I see... Well, let's give it a look, shall we?"

"Let's."

Flum opened up the door and stepped inside, expecting to find the place covered in dust and cobwebs due to years of neglect. However...

"It's...spotless."

"It's almost like someone had been living here."

The place was immaculate. What was more, it came furnished with tables, bookshelves, beds, and all the other basic necessities of everyday life. Flum and Milkit wandered around the first floor like first-time home buyers who'd just

received the keys to their new abode. Flum's heart raced as they explored the kitchen, living room, parlor, and even the bath and toilet. It was gorgeous.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of creaking boards coming from the second floor. The house was supposed to be empty.

Milkit looked over. "Maybe it's a small animal?"

No—whatever was moving around up there sounded pretty heavy. Even though the front door had been locked, Flum couldn't discount the possibility that someone had smashed a window and snuck in. She looked over at Milkit, her face awash with apprehension at the idea of being confronted by a thief or would-be intruder, and gripped her hand tightly before leading the way upstairs.

The second floor was also immaculately clean. That confirmed Flum's suspicions.

"Someone has been living here."

"Without permission??"

"It's the West District, so it's not out of the realm of possibility."

They spoke in whispers, so as to not be heard. Flum slowly reached out and grasped the metal doorknob. It was cool to the touch, though this only served to set her even more on edge. After another gulp of air, she slowly twisted the doorknob and slid the door open, trying to not make any noise in the process.

She was greeted by the sound of someone talking to themselves.

"That's just not gonna work. So how about... No, no, that smells awful. Eww. Did I mess up somewhere? No...it tastes bad, but it seems to still be effective."

Flum and Milkit beheld a woman in a tight-fitting white bodice and wide-brimmed steepled hat, sitting in a chair and muttering to herself as she mixed bizarre ingredients into some kind of concoction while mysterious spheres floated around the room. She looked an awful lot like someone Flum knew.

In fact, Flum had only ever met one person who dressed that way.

"H-hey, are you..."

“Huh? Someone’s here?” The woman casually glanced back over her shoulder. She didn’t seem terribly alarmed.

Upon seeing her face, Flum knew she was right.

“Eterna?!”

It was Eterna Rinebow—the “timeless witch”—whom she had traveled with on their journey to slay the Demon Lord and who had taught Flum everything she knew about medicine. Flum had a slew of questions that she wanted to ask, not the least of which was what Eterna was doing here in their house and how the heroes’ quest was going without her.

Eterna glanced nonchalantly at Flum as she struggled to form words. “Oh, hey, Flum.”



Chapter 15:

Home Sweet Home

FLUM'S JAW HUNG OPEN as she searched for words. She was so shocked by the sight before her that she couldn't even move. Milkit simply looked back and forth between her master and this newcomer.

Finally, Eterna stood up and walked over to Flum and put her hand on the other girl's cheek. "What's this?"

She was looking intently at the slave marking on Flum's cheek, which hadn't been there the last time they'd met.

"Now this is certainly strange. I was told that you went home, Flum. And then there's this marking on your face. What's going on here?"

Her voice began to take on an angry tone as she spoke. She wasn't mad at Flum, of course, but the steely look in her eyes still made Flum tense up. She wanted to ask why Eterna was here, but it didn't seem like the time or place for that yet.

"Who did this to you? And what are you even doing here?"

"Don't you... I mean, doesn't the whole party know what happened?"

"What do you mean, 'what happened'?"

"Jean decided to sell me as a slave because I was so useless to you guys."

Eterna went quiet for a moment at this. Finally, she heaved a heavy sigh and burst forth with, "That good-for-nothing, big-headed, snot-nosed little virgin punk!!"

This was *definitely* not the kind of language she usually used. Whether he was a virgin or not, Flum couldn't say, but the rest of the epithets fit Jean perfectly.

"You didn't know?"

"Don't be stupid! If we did, we would have stopped him!!"

Hearing Eterna say that immediately banished a dark cloud that had been

hanging over Flum's heart. She felt an immense weight lifted off her shoulders.

"Gadhio was so sad to see you gone, and Cyrill's been a wreck. She can hardly even bring herself to fight."

"Gadhio and Cyrill, too?" The last time they spoke, it had seemed like Cyrill hated her. None of this changed the fact that she'd been useless to the party, but it was comforting to know that she had a place in their hearts. This knowledge alone was enough to bring a tear to Flum's eye.

She raised her hand up to her cheek, feeling the tear, and brushed it away before breaking out into a smile.

"I'm so sorry, Flum. Jean told us that you'd gone home, and none of us thought to question him. I can only imagine the hardships you must have endured as a slave." It was strange to see Eterna, usually so casual and carefree, with such a grave look of concern on her face.

Flum reached back, took Milkit's hand, and pulled her companion over to her side.

"I met Milkit because of it, so it wasn't all bad."

Milkit felt her heart skip a beat at this. Their relationship had been built on the grounds that neither of them had a place to go back to. A part of her had worried that if Flum found her place with the party again, then she would cast her aside. Relief flooded her as she realized her master wasn't that kind of person.

"That girl's face... Is that mustardo toxin?"

"I knew you'd know what it was, but I'm impressed you even noticed through the bandages!"

"It's a very unique type of toxin, you see. But I can't believe that someone would use such an awful thing on a young girl's face. It's completely incurable without the right medicine."

"Speaking of which, there was a favor I wanted to ask you, Eterna."

"Go for it."

"Wait here, I'll be right back!"

Flum hurried downstairs to where they'd left their bags, leaving Eterna and Milkit alone for the time being.

"Flum's a pretty good kid, huh?"

Milkit paused, momentarily taken aback at suddenly being addressed. "Hm? Ah, yes, Master is quite amazing."

"Right? I'd love to beat that jerk Jean's face in for selling her off like that. Unfortunately, I haven't the faintest clue where they're off to now and wouldn't be allowed to enter the castle anymore even if I did."

Seeing the sincere look of regret on Eterna's face filled Milkit with joy. It warmed her heart to know that her master was thought of so highly, even among heroes.

"She has a way of drawing people to her. I think that's what Jean hated about her the most, the fact that he couldn't do the same. For all his intelligence, he couldn't get people to pay any attention to him."

"Is that the person who sold Master as a slave?"

"Right, that stupid virgin punk."

Milkit couldn't help but laugh at just how openly Eterna let her hatred for Jean show.

"I'm sure you'll notice it too, if you stick with Flum."

"I fully intend to, or at least as long as Master keeps me around."

"I can promise you that Flum would never kick you to the curb."

"Hmm..."

"Really, I'm sure of that. You see..."

Before Eterna had a chance to finish what she was about to say, their conversation was interrupted by the sounds of Flum dashing up the stairs.

"Here!" Flum shoved two bundles of herbs into Eterna's hands.

"Are these for a mustardo toxin antidote?"

"Master, when did you get those??"

“I found them when we were harvesting the kialahri. They aren’t actually all that rare, so I figured the odds were pretty good that I’d be able to find them.”

The biggest hurdle was finding someone to actually make the medicine. In Leitch’s case, it sounded like he’d already gotten hold of some underground practitioner to help him out, but Flum was hesitant to go so far as to ask him to make this medicine for her, too. While she’d been pondering how to find someone on her own, they just happened to run across Eterna.

“Sure thing, I’ll get right on it. It should only take about three hours, give or take.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with helping us?”

“Leave it to me.”

And with that, the matter was settled. Just as they were about to leave to give Eterna space to concentrate, Flum realized that she’d forgotten to ask one of the most important questions of all.

“Hey Eterna, what are you doing here, anyway? Whatever happened to the Demon Lord?”

“It wasn’t any fun anymore with you gone, so I quit the party.”

“They let you just up and quit? Just like that?”

“If you were supposedly allowed to quit just because you missed your hometown, then there was no reason for them to stop me. As for why I’m here, I just happened across this empty house and figured I’d borrow it for a while.”

“You know you’re trespassing, don’t you?”

“Hey, I’m working to pay my share, aren’t I? Besides, the place was just too good to pass up. If you really want me gone, though, I’ll leave.”

“No, of course not. I’m the new landlord as of today, so I’m more than happy to let you use this room however you please.”

“I owe you one.”

“No worries.”

“By the way, there’s something I also wanted to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“You have Epic equipment? The symbol on the back of your hand seems to suggest so. When I last saw you, you couldn’t fight at all, so I’m wondering how you managed to get your hands on something like that.”

“Aah, that. Well, you see, it turns out that my Reversal ability has the power to also reverse the effects of cursed items.”

A look of surprise flashed across Eterna’s face. She put her hand to her chin and mumbled to herself, “I see, so that’s how it works.”

Flum continued on cheerfully, “I only learned about it by complete accident. However, thanks to that, I’ve been able to make a living as an adventurer.”

Eterna scowled slightly at this. Sure, anyone could turn a profit as an adventurer, slave or otherwise. But the job came with its own particular brand of danger. “If you’re going to be working as an adventurer, I’d like to help. Please let me know if you have any problems at all.”

“Thank you, Eterna. If I run into anything I can’t handle on my own, I’ll come straight to you.”

With that out of the way, Flum took Milkit’s hand and left the room. Eterna listened to the girls walk downstairs, and once she was sure she had the second floor to herself, mumbled under her breath.

“Sometimes, there’s not much difference between the protector and the protected. No matter how many years go by, I’ll never forget that time I was saved.”

She stared distantly at the old, wooden wall in front of her and let out a deep sigh before beginning her work.

Back on the first floor, Flum and Milkit began to unpack their bags and move into their new home. There was relatively little work to be done thanks to Eterna keeping the house relatively clean, though Flum still had some mixed feelings about her presence. The two girls owned so little to begin with that unpacking was done almost as soon as they started. They ended up sitting

across from each other at the dining table with little to do.

“I can’t believe that this whole place is all yours now, Master.” Milkit glanced around the room, a sense of awe in her voice.

Flum quickly corrected her. “It’s our place, Milkit.”

“Master, I couldn’t possibly...”

“Well, that’s how I see it. So if there’s anything you want for the place, just let me know. We might need to discuss the budget a bit, but I’ll do my best.”

“...Understood.”

Sensing that arguing would get her nowhere, Milkit simply nodded in agreement. They’ve had similar conversations countless times at this point, and she was starting to realize how stubborn her master was. Flum highly valued Milkit’s opinion and wasn’t about to stop asking for it any time soon. Ever mindful of her position as a slave, Milkit wanted nothing more than to avoid burdening her master with her own desires, but if that was what her master wanted... Well, she had no choice but to slowly change her own outlook on life.

“I didn’t expect to have a roommate quite so soon, but with this, I think I can finally embark on my life as an adventurer,” Flum declared.

“Um, Master...”

“Yeah?”

“I know it’s a bit late to be asking about this, but are you trying to cure my face?”

“Of course. It would usually take only a day or so, but given how long you’ve had the condition, I think a week is probably a safer bet.”

“In just one week...?” Milkit unconsciously brought her hands up to her bandaged face, feeling the uneven skin beneath.

Obviously, she had been quite distraught when this first happened to her, but over time, Milkit had come to accept that this was just her lot in life. The thought that her affliction might be cured was, truth be told, frightening.

It wasn’t that she was against treatment, but more that she didn’t want to

change. If she were to change, then so would the world around her. For everything new she gained, she might lose something else in the process.

Flum, for example.

What if her master ceased being so kind to her once Milkit's face recovered? Just the very thought filled her with fear.

Flum's voice broke her train of thought. "You know, I never actually asked. Why were you forced to drink the toxin in the first place?"

Milkit cast her mind back but didn't have an answer for her. "I don't remember drinking anything that did this. My appearance just changed one day."

"Which means someone probably slipped it into your food. What a horrible thing to do to someone!"

Milkit was touched that Flum would be so angry over something that had nothing to do with her, and for no reason other than out of concern for her.

"Was your old master a man? Woman?" Flum asked.

"Woman."

"Huh. I guess that makes sense, in a way..."

"Oh?" Milkit tilted her head to the side. She wasn't sure what gender had to do with poisoning your own slave.

"Well, if your master was a man, then there'd be no reason for him to try and ruin your face like that. I mean, unless he had some kinda weird fetish that made him get off to stuff like that. However..."

Flum turned to Milkit and smiled.

"Be it a man's fetish or a woman's jealousy, the only reason anyone could possibly have wanted to harm your face must have been because you were so beautiful."

"I wouldn't know about that." It was the truth. Not once in her life had anyone ever told Milkit that she was pretty. She always thought of herself as an ugly, filthy creature.

“Oh? I mean, your eyes are so beautiful, and you’ve got a heart of gold. I’m pretty sure your face must be absolutely stunning as well.”

“Please don’t speak like that, Master. I would hate to let you down.”

“Not a chance! Say, did you look so down earlier because you were worried that your face wouldn’t live up to my expectations?”

Milkit was quick to agree. “Yes.”

Flum stood up and walked in a wide circle until she was standing behind Milkit. It wasn’t just so she could help alleviate Milkit’s concerns but also because she wanted her companion to truly understand how she felt.

“You know, Milkit...” She wrapped her arms around the younger girl from behind and whispered in her ear. “Do you really have such little faith in me?”

Milkit felt her heart begin to race.

“I’m not that shallow,” Flum continued. “I know we’ve only spent a short time together, but I’d hoped that much had gotten through to you.”

Milkit felt heat slowly spread from her heart, up her neck, across her cheeks, and through her ears. It was hard to see due to her face being covered in bandages, but the bright red ears poking out were a dead giveaway. Flum tugged lightly on her earlobe.

“Eeep!” Milkit let out a small cry at the sudden contact. It was actually quite cute.

“Aww, someone’s blushing. I guess you do get it.”

“I understand what kind of person you are, Master. And that’s exactly why I’m afraid.”

“That’s something you’re going to have to work through yourself, Milkit, as there’s nothing I can say that will alleviate your concerns. But I do want to say one thing.”

Flum squeezed Milkit even tighter around as she pulled their bodies closer. Milkit could feel Flum’s warmth against her back.

“No matter what happens, I will always be by your side.”

Her words resonated deep within Milkit's heart, slowly melting the layers and layers of defenses she had built up to protect her from getting too close to people. This was what weakness felt like. It would be so much easier to do without this feeling, but something inside her desperately wanted to give in. Milkit's desire to have a self, to feel more, to *want* more, had begun to grow.

Recently, her body had begun to react in way that defied her years of well-constructed logic. This was one of those times.

Milkit hesitantly reached out and placed her hand on top of Flum's.

About two hours later, the antidote was done. It wouldn't take long for it to start taking effect. It was incredibly bitter and smelled rancid, causing Milkit to screw up her face as she brought it in close, but she obediently drank it all without a single complaint.

It would be around a week until her face was completely cured, so Eterna promised to undo the bandages and check on her progress every day. There was only one condition, though: they had to do it in Eterna's room, and Flum wasn't allowed to attend. She could hear enough from the first floor to tell that the two were engaging in small talk but couldn't make out what they were discussing. Flum demanded they let her in on their little chat sessions but was turned down outright.

That week felt like an eternity.

"Why am I the only one not allowed to see her face?"

Flum's lonely grumblings from the first floor grew more and more intense by the day. Eterna and Milkit were chattering on about who-knows-what upstairs, while she sat alone on the first floor, hugging her knees to her chest. She couldn't even work up the will to sit on one of the chairs.

Even Milkit had backed up Eterna's decree when questioned about it. "I'd rather not show you my face until I've been fully cured, Master," she'd said, which had at least brought a grin to Flum's face and helped ease her annoyance.

This wasn't to say they were just sitting around doing nothing while they

waited for Milkit's face to recover. She and Milkit went on multiple shopping excursions to purchase furniture and other sundries to help make their house feel like more of a home. She'd also been taking on more F-Rank jobs and would soon be ranking up as an adventurer.

Her relationship with Y'lla the guild receptionist remained sour as always, of course. And Dein's goons were always a hassle to deal with, but Flum hadn't had any real trouble so far. They were probably still unaware that their comrades had been killed back in Anichidey, though they almost certainly suspected that Flum had something to do with them not returning.

She kept her guard up at all times, constantly on the lookout for when Dein's men would make their next move, trying to learn what she could about them in the interim. Flum had no intention of dancing around the issue forever. One of these days, it would all come to a head.

Finally, after a week of desperately waiting, the time finally came where Flum was given the honor of taking off Milkit's bandages.

Flum and Milkit were both a bundle of nerves as they sat facing each other on the bed in their room. Eterna had offered to give them space and wait in the living room. Flum had already undone the knot and the bandages were starting to droop. She took the end of the cloth in her shaking hand.

"Are you ready?"

Milkit's hands were resting on her lap, clenched into nervous fists. Her whole body was tense. "Y-yes."

Flum took a deep breath and slowly began to unwind the white fabric wrapped around the younger girl's face, starting at the bottom and working her way up. As her chin was revealed, Flum spotted creamy, white, flawless skin, though some of the redness still remained. More and more bandages fell away, until Milkit's soft pink, trembling lips were visible too. Flum's heart skipped a beat and she stopped moving for a moment.

"M-Master?"

The fear and uncertainty in Milkit's voice prompted Flum to resume

unwinding the bandages, unable to put a name to the feelings running through her head. Next up was Milkit's nose. It was small and cute, with just a tinge of pink to it. Her cheeks were soft and slender, and just like Flum, marked with the red symbol of a slave. Flum unconsciously reached out to touch it.

Milkit's whole body tensed up at this. It'd been so long since she had actually felt another person's touch on her face.

"Sorry!"

"No, not at all. It looks like we match now, Master."

The words hit Flum like an arrow through the heart, though she couldn't say why.

Knowing that she'd spend the rest of the day just prodding Milkit's silky cheek if she let herself, Flum forced herself to keep going. Milkit's eyes were as beautiful as ever, like clear emeralds embedded in her face. Flum could clearly see her own reflection in those eyes, her gaze was filled with a mixture of hope and uncertainty.

Finally, the bandages were completely off. Flum discarded them on the floor.

"Wow..."

The word spilled from her lips in a gasp.

Flum had no idea how such an exquisitely beautiful girl would have ever thought of herself as ugly. Just looking at her made Flum's heart race.

"Wh-what is it, Master?" Milkit slowly turned her gaze up to look at Flum.

All kinds of reassuring words sprung to Flum's mind, but none of them seemed quite fitting. It was times like these that made her hate her lack of skill with words, though maybe there *were* no words appropriate to the situation.

She was now more convinced than ever that Milkit's previous master had done what she had out of jealousy.

"Umm... Master?"

Milkit was clearly growing more concerned as Flum continued to stare at her in silence. Flum realized that this was no time to be searching for the right

words. Instead, she put her left hand to Milkit's cheek, eliciting a slight gasp. She then put her right hand on her other cheek, stroking the slave marking with her thumb.

Flum locked eyes with the other girl. "You're adorable, Milkit."

Both girls blushed intensely in that moment. The words weren't just embarrassing for Milkit to hear, but also for Flum to utter. Milkit opened and closed her mouth but couldn't seem to find the right words, either.

She wasn't upset, though. She was actually quite happy.



Flum, picking up on this, doubled down on the compliments. “Absolutely stunning.”

She smiled brightly—a smile that came straight from the heart. This was too much for Milkit to take. Moving faster than Flum had ever imagined possible, she dove for her discarded bandages, quickly turned her back on Flum, and began rewrapping her face.

“H-hey, Milkit. Why are you putting those back on?”

“I can’t do this, I can’t do it anymore!”

“Can’t do what?”

“My face, it’s all wrong. I can’t let you see it!”

She continued to wrap the bandages roughly around her head in a slipshod manner, leaving half of her mouth and right eye totally covered. It was better than letting Flum see her whole face, though. Milkit had never felt something like this before. Her heart beat so hard against her ribcage that it hurt. She couldn’t even turn back to face Flum.

Flum reached out and gingerly put a hand on Milkit’s shoulder before leaning in to look her in the eye. “You’re too cute to hide yourself away like that.”

“Now you’re just... You’re just making fun of me.”

“Absolutely not. You’re one of the most beautiful people I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s...that’s the first time anyone’s ever said anything like that to me.”

“Then the world’s full of stupid people, and I’m just lucky enough to have been the one to meet you. Now c’mon and show me your face.”

Flum reached up and began to undo the bandages once again.

Just the thought of her face being seen again made Milkit blush. She brought her hands up to her cheeks to try and cool herself down, but all she could feel was the flushed skin warming up her palms.

Flum laughed wryly as Milkit once again scrambled for her bandages and started rewrapping her face.

“I want to see you, Milkit. Or rather, it seems like such a waste to keep such a

beautiful girl under wraps.”

“It’s not a waste, I’m... I’m...”

However, it was clear that if Milkit reacted like this even when alone with Flum, going barefaced in public was completely out of the question. Milkit brought her hand up to her bandaged cheek and lightly tugged at the strips of fabric.

“What if I only took the bandages off when we’re alone together? Would that be okay?”

The sight of her flushed cheeks through the gaps in the bandages also caused Flum’s heart to race. “Well, if that would help you feel less embarrassed...”

“Really?”

“I mean, I think it’s fine, as long...as long as you’re okay with it.”

Even Flum felt a bit apprehensive about Milkit walking around outside uncovered, worried that someone might try to kidnap her.

Milkit bit down lightly on her lip. “To be honest, the thought of my face belonging to Master alone is kind of embarrassing.”

Flum was starting to grow dizzy. Such was the power Milkit’s face had over her.

“But I am your slave, after all, so I will do what you ask.”

Unable to restrain herself any longer, Flum dove in to embrace the other girl. Milkit blinked several times in surprise as she felt her body begin to warm. She slowly reached up and returned the hug.

Lost in the embrace, Flum could think of nothing else at that moment.

“Well, let’s start over then. Nice to meet you, I’m Flum.”

“Pleased to meet you. I hope to spend the rest of my days at your side.”

Outside the room, Eterna muttered in annoyance to herself.

“They sure are taking forever to take off those stupid bandages.”

Side Story:

Settling into a Daily Routine

EVERY TIME I SAW Milkit's unbandaged face, the words slipped easily from my mouth like a constant refrain.

"You're so beautiful..."

I sat at the table with my chin propped in my hands as I thought back to her face, mumbling the words aloud to myself. I didn't mean for anyone to actually hear it, but with Eterna sitting directly across from me, it was impossible for her not to. She fixed me with a steely glare but fortunately didn't say anything.

Ever since that day, I had been on cloud nine. Milkit had promised she would reveal her face to me only when we were alone, which meant I would have another opportunity to take off her bandages tonight. I couldn't wait. My heart pounded, and I could feel my face flush with the increased blood. I was filled with pins and needles from the sheer excitement of it all.

But it was innocent! My excitement was completely purehearted. I totally didn't have any weird intentions or anything, it was just that every time I took the bandages off and felt Milkit's skin against my own, it felt like electricity was coursing through my body. Even just thinking about it brought back the sensation.

"I'm just removing bandages, is all..."

Another comment mumbled aloud, another glare from across the table. Once again, Eterna let it drop without a word. I could feel her cold stare but decided that it was just better to not pursue.

I could tell I wasn't the only one who felt that strange sensation when removing the bandages. Milkit had to have felt the same. Or at least, it seemed like she did. Well, I couldn't exactly say whether she felt the *same* sensation, but she'd been acting kind of odd today. To be fair, so was I. Maybe we were both just too keenly aware of what awaited tonight?

Or maybe she hated me for what happened yesterday?

No, that couldn't be it. Of that much, I was certain. I didn't exactly have anything to back up that confidence, but I was still somehow certain of it.

"I feel like we'd really grown a lot closer..."

Another comment mumbled to myself. They said the third time was a charm.

I heard the sound of a bath being run and jerked my head up to look in that direction. Eterna was staring at me with a smirk on her face this time. I wanted to argue that I wasn't thinking about anything weird but decided to say nothing once more.

The sound of the bath meant that Milkit was currently relaxing in the tub. Eterna's water magic made it relatively easy to draw a bath whenever we wanted, so we made it a daily ritual to take some time to soak in the tub. Even having a bathroom all to yourself was quite a luxury in the West District. Though the house was a bit on the old side, it had multiple rooms and was quite spacious.

"I really should thank Leitch for this."

Eterna smirked across the table at me again.

"What are you looking at, anyway?" I demanded.

"Hmm?"

"You keep giving me weird looks!"

"Me? A top-tier mage with a heart of gold? I'd do no such thing. You must be overthinking things, Flum."

"I can hear you sigh when you stare at me!" Besides, I hardly thought that a mage with a heart of gold would call themselves top-tier.

"What else am I supposed to do? You seem to be craving attention, so I might as well give it to you."

Wow, she was really laying it on thick!

"Where's this pompous attitude coming from? I'm not looking for someone to pay attention to me."

"Well then, dare I ask what you were thinking of when you heard the water

running? Milkit's naked body, perhaps?"

"What makes you say that?!"

"Because you're acting like a prepubescent boy who's just about to go on his first date."

That example was totally uncalled for. What kind of person did Eterna take me for—and couldn't she at least have made it a girl in her analogy?!

"I'm a completely normal, run-of-the-mill, sixteen-year-old girl, I'll have you know!"

"Huh. Most normal girls don't get excited over the mere thought of removing a bandage, last I checked."

"Hmph!" She'd landed a critical hit. Somehow, she'd seen right through me. If I gave in now, I'd be admitting that I *was* getting excited over it—and I was worried about it, sure, but not excited exactly. Couldn't she find some more ladylike terminology?

"Now hold up, Eterna. I don't think excited is quite the right word here."

"Hmm, how about aroused, then?"

A death blow. This was only getting worse. How had we ended up here?

"Now you're going too far! I'm just... Look, it's... I'm just innocently mulling things over, okay!"

"I don't get it."

"What part?"

"Milkit's face has healed. You saw her without the bandages."

"Yes, that's right."

"So why is she still wearing the bandages? Why will she only show her face to you? That's what I don't get."

When she put it like that, I could see where Eterna was coming from. Maybe she was just frustrated by no one explaining anything to her and wanted to make her annoyance known? In that case, I'd really done wrong by her. After all, she was the one who had cured Milkit. Keeping her, of all people, out of the

loop had been pretty rude.

“I’m sorry, Eterna.” I bowed my head low and tried to explain myself. “You see, Milkit is still too shy to let anyone other than me see her face.”

“Ah, gotcha. I guess if she’s spent much of her life with her face hidden, it’ll be a while before she’s ready to show it off to the world.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Strictly speaking, it also probably had something to do with the fact that I kept telling her how cute she was, but Eterna wasn’t that far off the mark. Besides, she seemed satisfied by my explanation.

She put her hand to her chin and took on a thoughtful expression. “So she’ll only show you, her master, her face?”

“That’s right.”

“And she’ll only take off the bandages when you’re alone in your room.”

“Umm, yeah.”

“She unravels her bandages and exposes her bare flesh to you when you’re alone in an enclosed space?”

“Technically, yes... Why do you keep going over this?”

“When you two are alone, you make her take off her coverings and show herself to you?”

“Whoa, I think that’s going a bit far!” I put my foot down. Eterna had a way of taking things to their extremes, and I wasn’t here to be her plaything!

“Flum, you pervert!”

“Who’s the real pervert here?? You’re the one who went down that line of thought! I mean, well, sure she’s cute and all...and her face is so warm, and sometimes the mood gets a little tense from the mere act of removing her bandages, and sometimes we get a little caught up in the moment, but...but!!”

To be fair, keeping Milkit’s exposed face all to myself was, in a way, not too different from having her undress only for me. But there really wasn’t anything lewd going on here! It was just that Milkit wasn’t used to having her face

uncovered, and doing this together a few times would help her get over the fear! Or so I thought.

However, Eterna just frowned. "It sounds pretty weird when you say it like that, Flum."

I stood up in a hurry.

"Well then, don't tease me about it in the first place!!"

If I listened closely, I could swear I could hear my voice echoing through the capital.

After her bath, Milkit made her way back to our room, where she sat on our bed and looked at me patiently. My heart began to thump heavily in my chest. After the conversation with Eterna earlier, I was even more aware of it than usual.

We were just taking off bandages. Nothing weird here... right? I mean, we'd done this just yesterday.

Stupid Eterna.

"Master?"

Milkit cocked her head to the side. God, she was so adorable sitting there in her nightgown. Her skin looked even softer than usual and carried a faint pink undertone to it from the warm bath. I had a hard time imagining that there was a creature alive that wouldn't find themselves breathless at the sight. Even Eterna couldn't possibly just stand there with a straight face when confronted with Milkit standing in front of her, damp hair draped across her exposed collarbones.

Right? It wasn't just me. It couldn't be.

The longer this went on, the more embarrassed I felt myself grow. Maybe I *was* turning this into something of an odd situation where I was keeping the sight of Milkit's face to myself. Maybe I was starting to feel...possessive?

"Is something the matter, Master?"

“Huh? Um, I, uh... No, not at all!”

My nervous laughter only seemed to make Milkit even more confused. I sat down next to her, and we locked gazes. Her flawless, crystal-clear eyes looked straight into my own.

“Aww, that’s just not fair.”

“I’m sorry, have I done something wrong?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that your eyes are so beautiful.”

What was this, some kind of eye fetish I was developing? No, not a fetish. That wasn’t quite right. Even so, her eyes just seemed to draw me in.

“Your eyes are beautiful too, Master.”

“No need for the compliments, Milkit. My eyes are just as dark and cloudy as my heart.”

“Don’t say that, Master. I think you’re quite beautiful. Far more than me.”

“I’m nothing compared to you.”

“No, you’re far prettier, Master.”

“No, you!”

I grabbed both of Milkit’s hands and squeezed them, causing her to let out a gasp. Okay, maybe I went too far. But it was all true. After all, I knew my own face so well that I was pretty bored of seeing it.

“I’m your master, right? So that means I’m right.”

“Most masters would say quite the opposite. However, you are correct. If you say so, then I must agree.”

Now I just felt like I was forcing my will on her. But it was all true, though I suppose it wasn’t exactly necessary to force her to agree with me. Though I was confused why she couldn’t see it.

Perhaps she’d just become too pessimistic over the years, and this was that coming out.

Finally I felt that we could get to the main event: removing the bandages.

“All right, let’s get started.”

“I think I’m ready. Please start whenever you’d like, Master.”

Ready...? So apparently Milkit has also been thinking about this a lot, too. I felt a bit better knowing that we were both of the same mind.

I reached my hands around her head and started undoing the knot. I could feel Milkit’s breath on my ear as I leaned in. It felt warm.

“Ah...”

A gasp escaped Milkit’s throat as my arm brushed against her neck. Fearing she might be ticklish, I hurried up to undo the knot and started removing the bandages from her face, starting from the bottom and working my way up.

Little by little, her silky-soft, snow-white skin was exposed to the open air. I could hardly control my breathing at this point.

Her lips were a deep red, like a droplet of berry syrup. Maybe she was excited? I certainly felt the same. We seemed to both be sharing the same emotion, even though we couldn’t put a name to it. The specifics may be different, but we were heading in the same direction.

As we continued to spend time together and deepened our relationship, I was sure we’d reach the same end point. Or at least that’s how I felt.

At this point, even I had no idea where this journey would take us. But at the very least, I was just happy that Milkit and I would be on that journey together.

Maybe Eterna was right, our relationship had grown quite close—maybe even indecently so!

Or at least that’s what my brain was screaming at me as I finally finished up removing the bandages from Milkit’s face. I slowly placed my hands on her cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful.”

“Please don’t say it so much, Master, especially today. Of course I’m happy to hear it, but I won’t be able to keep looking you in the eye.”

“All right, I’ll try to keep it to a minimum then.”

“But you’re still going to say it...”

“Of course I will. I mean, you are absolutely stunning, Milkit.”

I gently patted Milkit’s face. The heat from her burning cheeks warmed the palms up my hands as I rubbed them against her soft flesh.

“Are my cheeks really...that nice?”

“Just touching them seems to make me smile.”

I wasn’t even trying to flatter her. It was true, I just loved the feeling of them.

“Um, Master, I know this is a rather rude request, but...”

“Huh? Please, no, just say whatever you want.”

She spoke slowly and hesitantly. “Well, uh, may I touch your cheeks?”

Of course she could! I didn’t even see why she had to ask.

“You can touch my cheeks whenever you’d like, Milkit.”

“I... Thank you.”

She ever so gently placed her hands on my cheeks. They felt cold for a second, before the heat from my cheeks transferred over and our body temperatures fell into equilibrium. A slight grin tugged at the corners of her mouth as she traced her thumb along the slave marking under my eye.

“This is what ties us together.”

She’d said the same thing yesterday. I’d thought it was just a way to try and cover up how embarrassed she was but could tell now that it actually meant quite a lot to her.

Milkit had no desire to stop thinking of herself as a slave. No matter what I said or did, I would always be her master in her mind. But this marking, the mark of a slave, was the one thing that made us equals.

“Are my cheeks really that nice?”

She nodded firmly. “Somehow, I feel like it fills up a hole inside me that’s been left empty for so many years.”

She took the words right out of my mouth.

That's exactly how I felt. Like we filled in the pieces of each other that had been missing.

And there was nothing perverted about that at all.

Not like I had to justify myself anyway. That's just how I felt.

This was different than being with family, friends, or even a slave.

"Thank you, Master."

Milkit slowly drew her hand away from my cheek, and I felt the cool air brush across my flesh. Somehow, I felt a sense of sadness at the loss of her touch.

"Can I touch your cheeks again tomorrow?" She sounded almost apologetic as she spoke, so I was quick to jump in.

"Of course! I mean, you can anytime you want. Heck, today even."

She blushed a deep crimson and spoke in a whisper. "There's no way I could do it again tonight. If I touch your cheeks for too long, I feel like my heart might burst. I think it would be better to do it a little at a time."

She was really, really good at somehow pinpointing all of my weaknesses.

"I truly appreciate how you fe...eep!!"

I threw myself into her, knocking Milkit back on the bed and pulled my head to her chest.

"Master, please warn me before you do something like that."

"S-sorry!"

Just like yesterday, I'd been so overwhelmed with emotion that I lost all control and went with what felt right. She was just so adorable. It was like she'd been sent down to this planet for the express purpose of filling my heart with such joy that it could burst.

"Your heart, it's pounding." Maybe she was just so thin and frail that it was easy to hear.

"You surprised me, Master. But still, I feel relaxed in your arms."

I felt Milkit's arms wrap around my back and the tension drain away from my

body. I might have been betrayed, discarded, and sold as a slave...but at least I had Milkit. I was no longer alone.

I could almost hear Eterna complaining: “Don’t forget about me!” I decided to ignore that.

Much like yesterday, I spent the rest of the evening in Milkit’s arms. Finally, she let out one of her adorable yawns, and I set her free so we could get some sleep. She stood up and walked back to her bed.

As I climbed under the covers, I savored the residual warmth and scent of her body. It lulled me into a deep sleep, far better and more powerful than any magic I’d ever experienced before.

I hoped to spend every day like this, with Eterna looking on in bewildered annoyance while Milkit and I grew closer and closer with each passing hour. Maybe someday we’d even put a name to our unique relationship.

Afterword

HELLO! This is Kiki, the author of *Roll Over and Die: I Will Fight for an Ordinary Life with My Love and Cursed Sword*.

Those of you who picked up this book realizing there was something darker lurking underneath the cover, those of you who were hoping for a “slice of life” story of happy days in the royal capital, and even those of you who already knew this series from when it was serialized online—I thank you. I hope you enjoyed the story.

The story is basically a mishmash of all of my interests: fantasy, lesbian romance, horror, and fight scenes, so I’m well aware it’s meant for a pretty niche audience. Going to print was the furthest thing from my mind when I began work on this story, so it’s still hard for me to even comprehend. I guess you just never know what life will bring, huh?

Back to the story itself, I’ll be honest: I know the title’s really long, and actually, the vast majority of it is dealt with all in the first volume. We could probably reduce it to “I Will Fight for an Ordinary Life” without any real issues. That’s right—basically, the goal of this story is to tell the tale of how Flum and Milkit establish...fight for?...struggle to create?...a normal life for themselves.

But a slow, uneventful life is pretty boring.

In the latter half of this book, I tried to focus on creatures other than the typical fantasy fare of slimy blobs, goblins, harpies, and dragons that you’re all used to. I made up some mock-ups of my own, but I’m truly indebted to the amazing work of the book’s illustrator, Kinta, and my editor. Let me just apologize now, though, because certain...things will be making an appearance in volume two of the series, and the story will definitely be picking up the pace.

...You know, as I write this, I can’t help but notice that it’s a lot harder to write an afterword than it is to just write a novel in the first place. After flipping through several books to see what other authors put in these things, I’m relieved to see it’s not just me. I guess my only real option is to go with the

tried-and-true approach of letting the characters speak for themselves and insert myself into the conversation.

FLUM: “Heya, it’s Flum!”

MILKIT: “Um, h-hi, Milkit here.”

AUTHOR: “And it’s me, Ki...”

Okay, never mind, that was awful. Let’s just stop there. It added a little to my word count, fortunately, so it looks like I’m almost done with this thing.

Lastly, I’d like to thank those who worked on this book.

Kinta, you truly are amazing. No matter how bizarre or absurd my request, you always managed to work up an image that was 100× better than I’d ever even imagined. Every time you sent me your latest work, my heart skipped a beat. I can’t thank you enough.

I also can’t forget my editor. If it weren’t for you constantly keeping a first-time author like myself on track, and your unfailingly prompt and polite responses, I don’t think I could have done this.

And of course, there were the many other people who helped publish this book, and you, my dear readers, who also deserve credit for making this project a reality. I am truly in your debt.

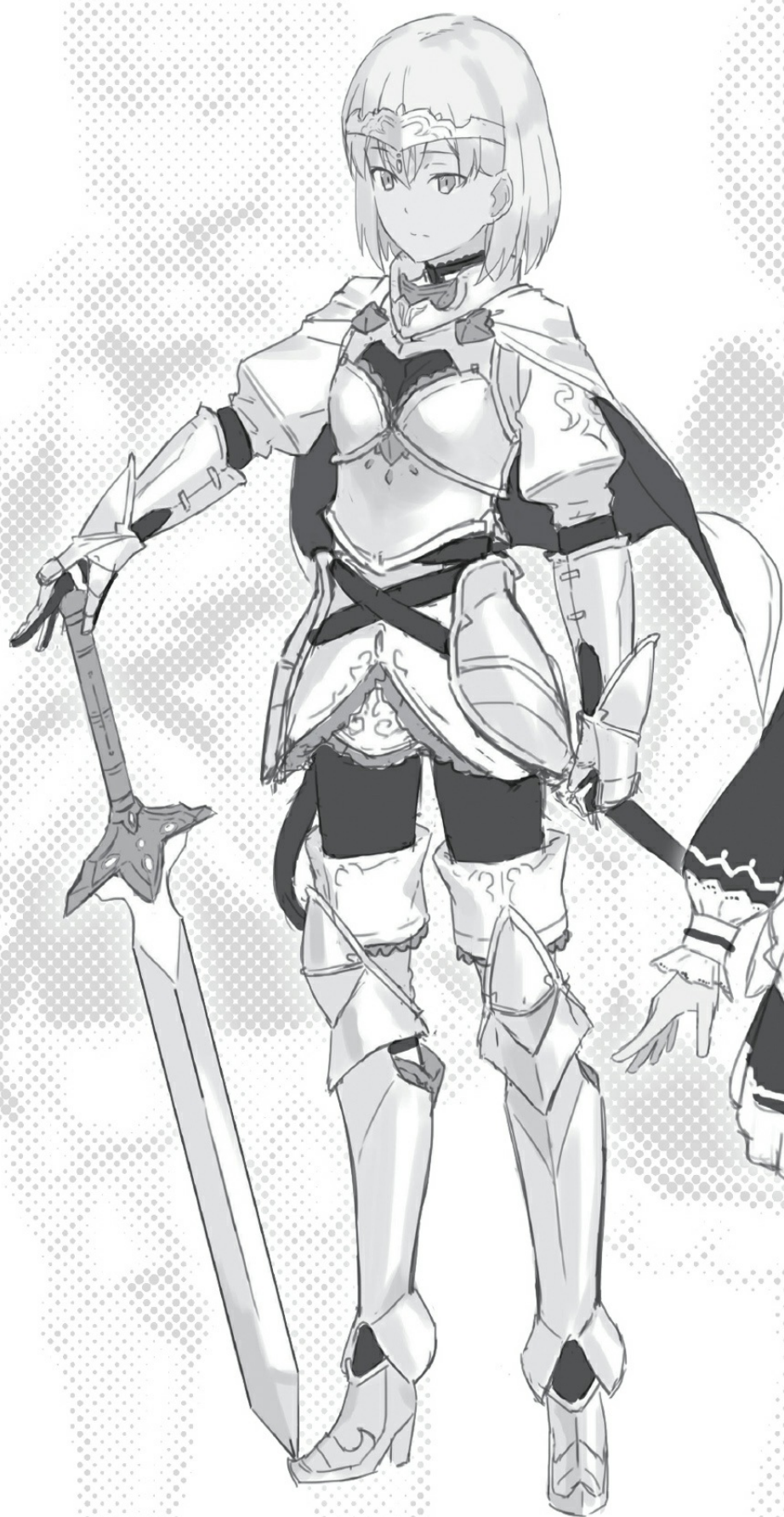
I hope you’ll stick around for the continuation of Flum’s exciting adventure.

FLUM APRICOT



Artworks

Character
Design



CYRILL SWEECHKA



MILKIT

SARA ANVILEN



NEIGASS



ETERNA RINEBOW





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